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LEADING LADY

D. L. MURRAY'S

GREAT NOVELS

OF OXFORD
FOLLY BRIDGE

OF LONDON
ENTER THREE WITCHES

OF ROME, LONDON AND PARIS
TALE OF THREE CITIES

OF BRIGHTON
REGENCY

OF THE CRIMEAN WAR
TRUMPETER SOUND!

OF THE JACOBITES
COMMANDER OF THE MISTS

OF PAPAL ROME
THE BRIDE ADORNED

OF THE CIRCUS
STARDUST

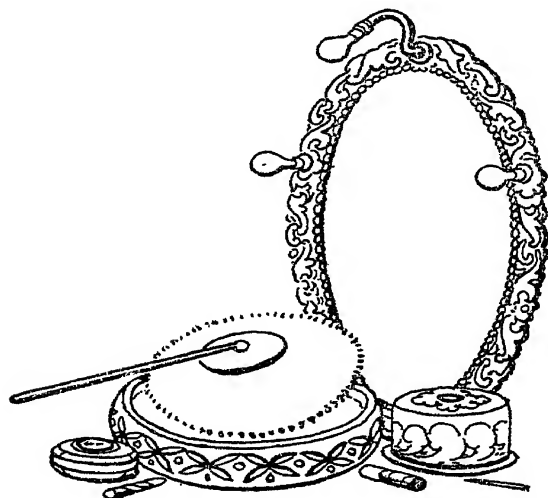
LEADING LADY

by

D.L.MURRAY

*When one loves a woman one loves
something hidden, something mystical*

ROBERT HICHENS



London

Hodder and Stoughton Limited

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ON THE OUTSIDE

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—

One word on the outside before you go into the show!

Our plot is of players; but these players are all as imaginary as the pieces for which they are cast and the theatres in which they appear. Not one actual person has a part in this drama, and should you fancy some shadow of a likeness here or there, it was not intended. Remember that types do not change much in theatre land, that "lines of business" are strictly limited, and that the puppet-carver cannot find a tint of hair or shape of nose that *nobody* has ever had!

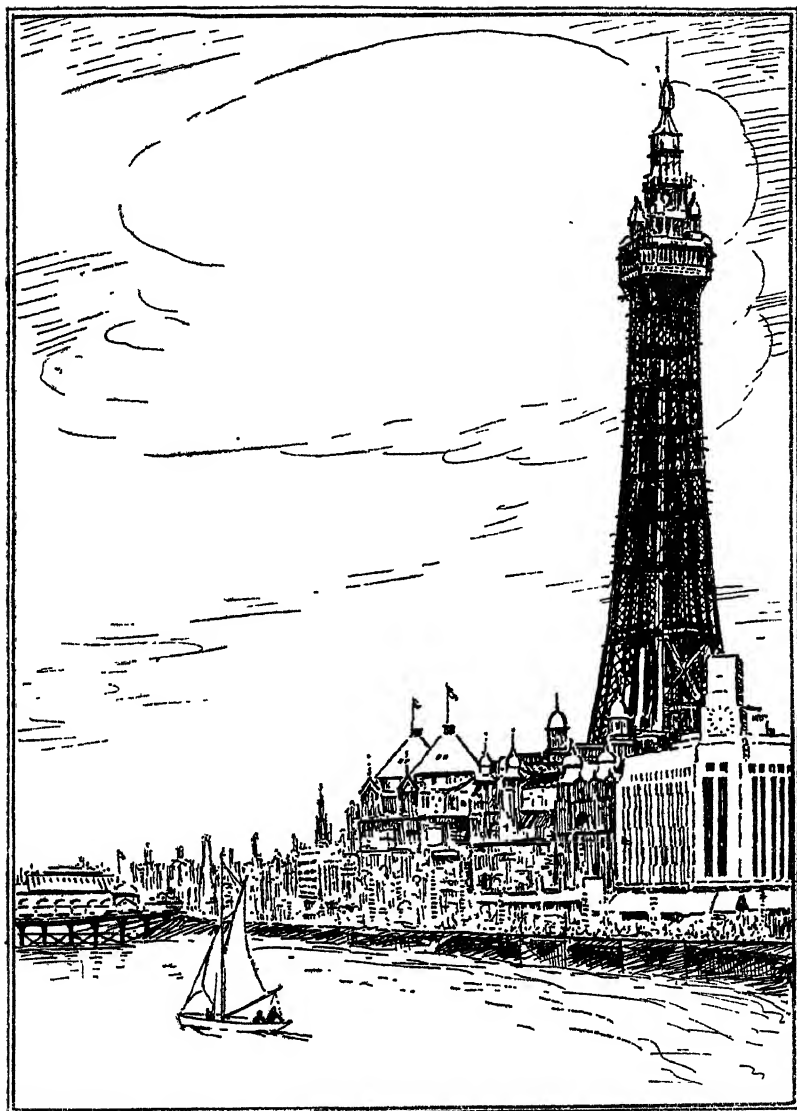
Some may feel that logic called for us to go farther and call our principal scene "Silverpool" or some other town not to be traced upon the map of England. But Blackpool beats all that fancy can devise; she is surely big enough to smile if our figures dare to caper on her spacious pavements, or set their booths up in between her splendid theatres. Nor (we hope) will she frown too austere if by chance one or two of her famous buildings that were still in scaffolding at the date when this tale begins cast their shadows before upon our mimic back-cloths.

Now pass right in, please, ladies and gentlemen! The saxophones are playing—and lo! these are no longer puppets!

NOTE

THE scenas "Luxury Lady," "Park Nobody Knows," "Blackpool 1898-1938," and "Manhattan Madness," described on pages 264, 268, 270-271, 334-335, are adapted by permission from unpublished scripts by Mr George Pughe, who retains stage and screen rights.

D. L. M



PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I

THERE are two English cities at the approach to which the traveller peers from his railway carriage for the first glimpse of an aspiring tower—Oxford and Blackpool.

So thought Peter Warner when, just beyond Wrea Green, a tiny knob appeared on the horizon between the clumps of trees that clothe the gently rolling pale-green flats from Preston to the sea; and he was still grinning at his thought as he drew back into the compartment with a spidery movement of his lanky legs and arms, and apologized to the Lancashire matron across whose bunion he had hurled himself in his eagerness to see.

Peter's grin was hard to resist. It lit up his sallow face between the small side-whiskers in which his untidy, gingerous hair terminated; and when he added, "I *had* to see the Tower," the stern countenance opposite relaxed, and the injured party replied, "Nay, you should sit t'other side to see Tower!" An approving murmur came from the rest of the carriage, now dimming in the autumn dusk, and in a few moments grave, fatigued men and women were bending towards one another while they exchanged memories of their first visits to Blackpool—memories of spade and bucket, of ice-cream cornets, and the ascent of the open iron-work obelisk which, apt symbol of the industrial civilization over which it presides, holds out to the toiling North over miles of countryside its giant invitation to pleasure.

As Peter listened, turning the lively brown eyes that flashed behind his gold spectacles from speaker to speaker, he reflected that he, too, could have added his quota of reminiscence. For, marked off though he was from his workaday fellow-travellers by his orange tie, tweed jacket, corduroy trousers, and suède shoes, he had come originally from just such a home as most of them were returning to, and, like his parents and grandparents before them, had reckoned the yearly week's holiday at Blackpool the chief magic of his childhood. He could have capped the anecdotes that were being passed along the benches on either side with chuckles and slow smiles by his own tale of thrills and disasters. Attending with one ear to the classic fable of the homeward-bound holiday-makers pitching what was left of their money out of the windows on the train, he recalled how he had been lost for hours in the Cnossian labyrinth of the Winter Gardens and led howling to the police; how he had fallen with a thump from the back of a donkey; and how he had been put to bed, stingingly smacked, after getting his boots and knickers drenched by the inrushing tide.

These emotions, recollected in the tranquillity of the chill autumn

evening to the soothing jog of the train, were as richly satisfying as the memories of Punch and Judy, the Tower Circus, and the pierrots singing "Keep the Home Fires Burning!" on the Central Pier. There had been a war on about that time, hadn't there? but it had not scotched his enjoyment. What a lot of slapping, though, one had been able to take in those days with little more than a second of red-hot resentment!

Lytham . . . St. Anne's, with its sand-dunes fading in the gloaming . . . Squires Gate . . . at each station the carriage emptied a little, and by the time the rhythm of switchbacks on South Shore looped itself over the deepening blue of the twilight, Peter had room to move his elbows and stretch out his long legs. He felt as happy as a schoolboy again at the brief break in the monotonous hustle of his London existence afforded by this visit to Blackpool at the fag-end of its season.

Peter Warner worked as a news collector for the celebrated writer of a daily Gossip column, beloved of the fashionable West End world, in a London paper, who drew thousands a year for translating into jerks of mechanical facetiousness the information that Peter and his colleagues brought in for guineas and half-guineas. When Peter thought of what Athelstan Rigglesworth earned by sitting in bars and restaurants all day and dictating in the evening a spiteful résumé of the scraps that his helpers wore out their shoes and their tact and their self-respect to gather, and what a dread reputation Athelstan enjoyed on the strength of it, it made him smile. It was perhaps because it did no more than make him smile that he was still hunting those half-guineas, and had never had his name printed in any newspaper—let alone displayed in the black and menacing type of the ATHELSTAN RIGGLESWORTH which appeared at the head of each day's "Diary" in the *Morning Gazette*. If he had revolted instead of smiling he might—who knows?—have now been approaching Blackpool in his own Rolls-Bentley. But that was not Peter Warner's way—and anyhow, he had no real journalistic ambitions.

All he cared for was tunes—tunes and the words to go with them, for the two generally seemed to steal into his head together. Most of them, it is true, remained a secret between the shrill old piano (once his father's) which, with a camp-bed and a home-made crystal set for listening-in, was almost the only furnishing of his single room out at Fulham, and the immense portfolios in which he buried them after playing them over softly to an audience of one—himself. He seldom dared to take them any farther, though he had sold a song and a waltz to a small publisher in Charing Cross Road, and had known the intoxication of unexpectedly hearing the waltz played as an *entr'acte* one evening in a minor West End theatre. A little applause had followed, which had driven Peter with red ears out of the house. He had felt it dishonest to be having his stuff played and applauded in public when he knew that he had had no proper musical education.

This may sound surprising, considering Peter's father had been a conductor, his mother a famous "boy" in provincial pantomime, and that all his brothers and sisters played one instrument or another. Nay, he himself had been, as it were, born to a musical accompaniment, for the contralto who lodged in the top story of his parents' house in Liverpool was trying over her scales, urged on by the pious blasphemies of her Italian husband, at the moment when he arrived.

Then his eldest brother Joe had been drummer in a cavalry regiment, and as a boy Peter would gladly have halved his life to wear Joe's scarlet tunic and jack-boots, and ride the great piebald that bore the kettle-drums draped in the standards across its back. He would stand at the doors of pubs for hours just to catch a glimpse of his splendid brother within, and long to be old enough to pay for his drinks. He had been unable to believe that life held anything finer than a cavalry drummer's career, and even to-day he wasn't quite sure of it. His elder sister Ethel had been a violinist, but she had gone to Berlin and turned out badly; his second brother an accordionist working a double act on the Halls; then, after a lapse of seven years, had come Beryl Clare and then himself. Beryl, two years his elder, had trained as a harpist, and it might have seemed that it only remained for Peter to make his choice among the other instruments in the orchestra.

But it was not to be so. Of Peter alone among the family it had been decreed by their father that he should try to make a living by some other means than music. By the time he was fourteen years old Mr Warner was sick of helping his other children out of their difficulties. The gorgeous drummer-brother, after more than one public-house brawl at which the civil guardians of the peace had had to intervene, was dismissed the band, and after leaving the Army, sank into occasional employment varied by police-court sentences. Bob, early revealing an unfortunate tendency to select his professional partner for reasons unconnected with music, was getting fewer and fewer engagements and writing more and more begging letters to his father. Ethel—well, they didn't speak of Ethel any more at home. Beryl, by winning a scholarship at the Guild Hall School of Music, evaded the paternal ban on any more musical careers, but Peter, having shown no precocious gift as a musician, was firmly directed towards a commercial livelihood.

Of course, it was impossible in a household like the Warners' that Peter should not learn to play the piano in a practical if haphazard way, to read music and even to write it down. Nor could he well be forbidden to spend his pocket-money at concert and opera galleries. He had been enchanted by *The Beggar's Opera* when taken to see it as a small boy; and in later years never, if he could help it, missed either the Carl Rosa or the D'Oyly Carte companies when they visited Liverpool, or (after the family had moved to Chelsea) when they made

their rounds of the London suburbs. But all these things did not constitute a musical education.

After a course at a Commercial College, Peter had been found more than one job in business houses, but had failed to hold any of them down; and after a while, not wishing to trouble his father any more, he had sought to pick up a living for himself. He had packed music in a publisher's basement, tried to sell stories and poems without a single success, addressed envelopes, scraped past the audition into a musical comedy chorus—till they found out at the first rehearsal where the trouble was—walked on as a super in theatrical crowds, known the inside of doss-houses.

He had been pushed, uninterested, into journalism by an uncle who was the Press Representative of a large London music hall, and who opined that "it was time that boy did *something*." But Peter did little at first save stray paragraphs and notices of concerts nobody else could endure to go to until Athelstan Rigglesworth took him up. This happened when Athelstan, lounging one day after lunch into the *Morning Gazette* office, and perfuming it with a propitiatory cigar offered by his host, a Brazilian millionaire, found Peter, long-chinned, pale, and hollow-cheeked, dictating a "quarter column" on a students' performance of *Carmen* to a typist, and hopping from his chair to the table and thence to the radiator like a bird who has picked up a crumb. The mighty diarist listened uninvited—but Athelstan had long since induced the world to take his bad manners as a token of good nature—and presently ejaculated in his carefully preserved provincial accent, "What the hell do you think *you're* doing?"

"Journalism?" hazarded Peter with a sort of bright meekness, looking into his questioner's sulky face, with the tangle of black hair falling over its forehead, and the tragic, frustrated eyes.

Mr Rigglesworth made a proposition about journalism that disregarded any feelings of delicacy the typist might have, and flung his cigar stump casually into a basket full of important copy on the Chief Sub-Editor's desk. When that had been extinguished at the cost of blackening and slightly burning Peter's fingers, Mr Rigglesworth declared, "I'll show you what journalism means"—and on the whole he had not been false to his word.

To be one of Athelstan Rigglesworth's news-ferrets was hard work and relatively unprofitable—Peter was thankful when he could pick up three pounds a week, with something for expenses when he was sent far afield—but there was much to be learnt from it, as he discovered. He had only had one serious row with his chief—the time he absented himself for a full fortnight in the British Museum Library working at an article on a minor British composer for a new encyclopædia of music. When he stubbornly refused to come out, "I'll close that — place!" announced Athelstan in his wrath, and for more than a week readers of the "Diary," instead of learning about show-

girls' "scanties," leading actresses' quarrels, and the golfing costumes of Cabinet Ministers, had to endure a bitter campaign against the obsolescence and inefficiency of the British Museum. Circulation was already sagging when the Editor curtly telephoned the man before whom all London trembled, "Pipe down on that Museum muck, Athelstan! You're killing the paper." "I'll write what I — well choose!" Athelstan retorted, and, tearing to shreds the day's carefully prepared paragraphs on the sins of the Bloomsbury hierarchs, shouted for a typist to take down an attack on male film-stars' bloated earnings. Since then Athelstan had kept to his normal routine, and Peter, for three years now, had assisted him in it, sighing for the day when his time should be his own to give to the making of music

II

The train made a long pause outside Blackpool Central Station, and Peter, craning out of the window again, saw, above the red signal-lights, the Tower, now woven of shadows, standing like a sentinel directly overhead. As he turned back to take his bag and overcoat from the rack, his mind went to the evening before him.

He had been sent to Blackpool by Athelstan to see the opening performance of a grand new musical that was being "tried out" there prior to London production by that famous syndicate which, though it figures staidly enough as "Something-or-Other Productions, Ltd.," on the plate outside its registered offices, has never been known to the world of the theatre as anything but "Fizz." It gained the title from the initial letters of its four original partners' surnames. These partners were: Bob Forshaw, the Chairman, the self-made Lancashire showman accused by his enemies of "acclimatizing Blackpool in the West End"—though he certainly added to the gaiety of the West End by doing so; Arthur Inman, the producer and stage-director, who plays on colour like an organist; the musician, Grigori Zharkov, conductor and composer of so many familiar tunes—familiar, often, the first time they were played under his signature; and Ivan Zaleski, the theatrical financier, about whom it is hard to say anything definite, since he himself is unintelligible in six languages at once.

Fizz had its first London triumph with that memorable revue *Light of Heart*, and followed it up with the equally successful series, *Illusions of 1930*, *1931*, and *1932*. In the West End it had in 1937, when this story opens, the colossal Stadion, and the handsome St. Andrew's Theatre; in the North the chain of big variety houses called Purple Halls; and how many other interests it possessed through its subsidiary companies, such as Bob Forshaw, Bob Forshaw, Ltd., Forshaw and Grimwade, All-Star Musicals, Ltd., Valentine Productions, Ltd.,

controlled by its Chairman, as well as Popular Playhouses, Ltd., controlled by Zaleski, it may be doubted if even the partners knew—and was certainly the Inland Revenue's head-ache.

The impending production, therefore, of Fizz's latest musical, *I Like You, Lady!*, was an event, and, though there was a gentleman's agreement with the metropolitan Press that criticism should be deferred until the London *première*, Athelstan Rigglesworth was resolved that at least a paragraph or two of gossip about the show should appear in the "Diary" after the opening at the Palatine Gardens Theatre in Blackpool. "If they don't like it, they can do the other thing!" he had told Peter Warner, but he had taken care that his deputy and not himself should get the impact of the other thing, whatever it might be. He had heard that Arthur Inman, who had produced the show, had sworn to have him put out by force if he showed his face in the theatre on the first night at Blackpool, and he also knew that the saturnine Inman was a man of his word. Had he not scientifically drawn the red wine from Mr Rigglesworth's nose one night of heated discussion at the Mummers' Club?

Peter feared no personal violence, but neither was he elated at the evening's prospect, although it had been rumoured that in lighting and scenic splendour, as well as in the expensiveness of its cast, *I Like You, Lady!* would outbid anything Fizz had hitherto brought to birth. He seldom cared for the syndicate's productions, though he could not deny Inman's genius for colour and lighting, or his power of inspiring his artists with a "go" that no other director of the day could rival. But Peter was repelled by the rush and glitter of it all; he was usually left cold by the costly foreign acts brought over for each new show; and he decidedly resented the assumption that (except for Mr Zharkov) only American composers could turn out light music fit for the ears of the British theatre-goer. On the other hand, he welcomed any excuse for passing a few days in Blackpool again, and was also looking forward to the pleasure of seeing his sister Beryl, who was playing the harp in the specially augmented orchestra.

Peter therefore swung out of the station with a cheerful step, intending to deposit his bag at the nearby hotel where he had booked a room. Just as he came out into the street a voice behind him exclaimed, "Ee! There go t'illuminations!" and the grey outline of the Tower, rising close in front of him above the roofs, was suddenly split from head to foot by zigzag lines of light, while its summit blazed forth like an imperial crown. At the same moment along the slice of sea-front visible at the foot of the street pillars of golden fire flashed into view, and with a gleeful chuckle Peter realized that the last big spectacle of Blackpool's year was on.

But he had other things to do now than enjoy "t'illuminations." After getting rid of his bag at his hotel, he turned resolutely off the glowing front into the tangle of narrow streets, homely as the little sea-

side town of eighty years ago from which they have survived, in which Blackpool loves to envelop its modern visitors the moment they step aside from its spacious promenade and central thoroughfares. He was seeking the stage-door of the Palatine Gardens Theatre, where he meant to enquire at what time Beryl would be likely to come in for the evening performance.

Luckily for him the band was still rehearsing, though it was getting near six o'clock, as interrupted bursts of music coming through the swing-doors from the stage gave proof. Peter asked that Miss Warner might be told "a gentleman" had called for her as soon as she came out, and decided prudently to wait in the lane outside the stage-door. He had no wish to be recognized by anyone in authority this evening.

Sooner than he had hoped his tall sister, with her dark curls clustering like bunches of grapes over her ears, emerged behind a group of weary musicians. She raised her eyebrows at the sight of her brother.

"Oh! it's *you!*" she said with a note of disappointment in her deep voice. "You never told me you were coming. Do *they* know?" And she made a movement of her head towards the theatre.

"No," he answered, "and they mustn't. My seat was bought at an agency here. Let's get away from the stage-door, if you don't mind."

"What about some tea?" suggested Beryl, leading the way down a close alley towards the front.

"Do you mean *tea?*?" demanded Peter as he followed. "Or merely that anæmic southern institution, 'afternoon tea'?"

"Well, since I've eaten nothing since breakfast—we've had no proper break—I can do with something more solid than cakes."

"Grand! Shall we go to the Savoy?"

"If you like. But quickly, then! I haven't too much time."

In a minute or two they came out from the gloom of the alley into the radiance of the illuminated front, with its pillars and fountains of fire stretching away in a regular pattern to right and left for the whole length of the five-mile promenade, and its three piers extending their beaded fingers into the invisible sea. High overhead a clouded moon hung out its own curved lamp to cast a single chain of golden sequins in mid-ocean. As Peter and his sister made their way through the black masses of sight-seers, from whose ranks "E-e-eh!" and "O-o-oh!" went up in fusillades, he asked her how the show was shaping.

"Well, you can't see a great deal from the orchestra pit," she answered. "But they certainly don't know the songs—except the chorus, that is. Mr Zharkov is furious."

"Oh, is he?"

Peter's voice was cold. He could not bear the Russian *maestro*, with his moist, crimson lips, hard, black eyes, and greased hair brushing his collar behind.

"Well, naturally he's annoyed," retorted Beryl, "since he composed all the music for the show—all, that is, that doesn't come from America."

"And that wouldn't take long to learn!"

"Don't be silly! It includes all the concerted numbers and a very haunting waltz."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" demanded Peter.

"Now, that's all a d——d lie!" Beryl's rich colour went a little deeper by the light of a kiosk they were passing, picked out in brilliant curves. "Mr Zharkov's a first-class musician and has no need to steal anybody else's work."

"Why do it, then?"

"He doesn't. It's just journalistic scandal that none of you dares put into print."

"Well, don't get hot, my girl!" said Peter good-humouredly as they turned into the Savoy Restaurant and pushed through the crowd in the hall towards the staircase.

"High teas first floor!" announced Peter. "You see I know the ropes. Let's hope we get a table!" and his long legs, taking the stairs two at a time, disappeared in front of his sister. Someone had once unkindly said that Peter Warner in motion looked like a *swastika* revolving—and even in 1937 the comparison was disagreeable.

Beryl followed him now with a half-scornful, half-indulgent smile, and took her seat opposite him at the last remaining table in the long, brown-panelled room with its windows overlooking the fairy spectacle of the sea-front. A middle-aged waitress, whose smile was a benediction, presented the card, and Peter read aloud, "Roast chicken, sausages and egg, bacon and egg, sausages and tomatoes, fried plaice and chips, egg and chips. Welsh rabbit—here, Beryl, choose for yourself! Sausages and egg for me, please!"

Beryl glanced moodily at the card. "I don't really care for any of this," she grumbled. "I think I'll just have cakes after all. . . . Oh, well!" she added, noting the waitress's maternal look of disapproval, "sardines on toast, if I must. I suppose we'll have to go all the way downstairs again if I don't order something like that."

"But you said only a little while ago that you were hungry!" complained Peter.

"Yes? . . . Well, I'm not any longer," she answered, pulling off her scarlet knitted cap and patting her curls into tidiness. "They seem to cater for schoolboy appetites only in this place—and they're not far out, so far as you're concerned."

"Tell me some more about the show!" Peter pleaded. "Just a little dirt that I can telegraph to the mighty Athelstan!"

"I don't know any 'dirt,' as you call it," she answered pettishly. "I never listen to theatre gossip. If you want any information, I am sure Mr Zharkov will give it you, if I ask him."

"I want no favours from that d——d Russian," retorted Peter.

"How prejudiced you are!" drawled Beryl.

"Anyhow, he mustn't know I'm here. . . . Is Monty Du Parc around, by the way?"

"Who's he? I don't know him."

"Fizz's Press Representative. He likes me, but I don't want to meet him, if I can help it, to-night, any more than I do Zharkov or Inman. Bob Forshaw sailed for America last week, didn't he?"

"I believe so," said Beryl. "But if you really want to know what this show's like, it's exactly the same as the last . . . and the one before that . . . and the one before that. . . . That any help to you?"

"Not much. I suppose they've spent a fortune on it?"

"Never been such dresses and lighting," said Beryl. "You must admit that Inman——"

"I've nothing against Inman except that he's sold his soul to Fizz. He blends colours so that they create emotion, and I don't know how he does it. But he ought to be producing Wagnerian opera and Chopin ballets——"

"Perhaps," interrupted Beryl, pouring out the tea which had just come, "he thinks there's more money in *I Like You, Lady!*"

"Money!"

"Well, we can none of us live without it, laddie!" Beryl fastidiously picked the skin off her sardine with a fork and laid it on the edge of her plate.

"Tell me some more," said Peter resignedly.

"Lillian Green and Harry Vernon are the singers—you probably know. Lillian's voice is getting a bit of a tremble, but she carries it off by technique."

"Technique and Tosti's 'Good-bye'!" commented Peter, eating sausage and buttered toast with a relish.

Beryl smiled. "Actually she has a new song, 'Sunny Sierra.'"

"Another of Mr Zharkov's original efforts?"

"Ha-jolly-old-ha!" murmured Beryl.

"And the big production numbers?"

"One's the Jewel Scene from *Faust*, sung by Lillian and Harry, which is followed by a sort of modern *Faust* ballet in a cocktail bar, danced by Ilena and Varshevsky magnificently."

"Yes!" assented Peter. . . . "Pour me some more tea, please! They are a couple of foreigners we *do* welcome . . . You can cut out the juggler from Paris and the negro singer from Harlem; there's been enough about them already in the papers. What about the comics?"

"Larry Milner."

"The clown with the tear in his voice. Yes."

"Whirter and Carr."

"Geniuses of the un-funny!"

"They're nice fellows. They work dreadfully hard, and pay enormous sums for material."

"Somebody's been robbing them, then."

"They've a new sketch, in a barber's shop."

"Oh, dear! It *does* sound the mixture as before, doesn't it?"

Beryl shrugged her shoulders rather impatiently. "Phew! it's hot in here!" she said, and loosened her coat. Upon her red jumper sparkled a pretty silver-and-enamel brooch.

"I say, that's nice!" exclaimed Peter, bending forward innocently to look at it. "Who gave you that? Gerald?"

"Gerald? No!" snapped Beryl, peering into the tea-pot. "You may as well know at once, Peter, that it's all off between Gerald and me."

"Good Lord! I *am* sorry!" ejaculated Peter. He really had hoped that Beryl was going to make a match of it with Gerald Rose, a good-natured, pushing young agent, who was going to get somewhere, and obviously adored her. Gerald had been such a relief from her earlier "affairs" with elderly married men or more than questionable chorus boys. "I'm sorry," he repeated, staring with dismal fascination at the enamel brooch.

"You needn't be!" retorted Beryl crisply. "It would never have worked. I'm not going to be any man's doll, to be stood here and sat there, told when I may go out and when I must come in, who I may speak to and who I mustn't lunch with! Gerald was always bossy; but when it comes to ridiculous jealousies——"

"Such as——"

"Well, it appears my own boss, even, mustn't speak to me, after five years with the firm! Mr Zharkov danced with me twice at Léonie Valterra's party, and that was improper! He took me with him to the Albert Hall one evening to hear Cortot, and that was shocking! He asked me up to his flat one afternoon to play Ravel with him on a lovely French harp he had just picked up in the Old Brompton Road—and that was appalling!"

"And did Zharkov give you that, too?" asked Peter bluntly, indicating her brooch.

Beryl countered his look with a defiant stare. Her eyes, several shades darker than her brother's, had the velvety look of deep-brown pansies. "Mr Zharkov did," she answered. "On my birthday. He said it was for five years' good service with the firm. I thought it sweet of him."

"It *was* your birthday last week—wasn't it?" murmured Peter guiltily.

"It was. You forgot it. Mr Zharkov paid me the compliment of remembering it. I like men who think of those little things."

"Beryl, I do hope you're not going to do anything silly!"

"No. I should require pearls, not a silver brooch. . . . Anyhow, is it any business of yours?"

"I wonder?" said Peter in a troubled voice. "*Somebody* ought to warn you."

"Thanks, Dad!"

"I wish Father was still alive."

"If you mean that I should have let even Father interfere with what I wanted to do once I was earning my own living, you're wrong! So there!"

"Don't you care what people think of you?"

"Most people I know would think me clever . . . and very lucky . . . if there was anything of the sort you mean in it, which there isn't. After all, why shouldn't I stand in well with my boss, if I want to get on?"

"How does Zharkov help you to get on? You've played the harp in the orchestra for five years, and, for all he'll ever do for you, can go on playing it there for another fifteen!"

"Just where you're wrong as usual. He's promised to get up a special Sunday concert for me when we get back to Town."

"Well," answered Peter, unconvinced, "I still think this is a most dangerous . . . and undignified . . . flirtation."

"I don't give two hoots for your opinion on such a point, and you know it." She stood up. "Shout for the bill! I must get back to the theatre."

"Look here, Beryl, I'm sorry if I——"

"Oh, forget it! You have to preach a sermon every so often, don't you, Peter dear? . . . I must rush! . . . Coming round after the show?"

"Yes. You'll be dead, won't you?"

"That'll worry Inman! Bye-bye!"

She disappeared down the stairs, and Peter went to the desk to pay the bill.

III

As Peter came out of the restaurant he looked at his watch and decided that there was a good half-hour before he need slink into the theatre. He would be less likely to be noticed if he arrived in the rush just before the curtain rose. He therefore turned north to join himself to the increasing throng that was parading the cliff to enjoy the illuminations. Worry about Beryl nevertheless stuck like a burr at the back of his mind. His own views on the ethics of sex might be hazy, but it was a golden haze, idealistic to excess; that his own sister should be placarded everywhere as the girl who had been smart enough to hook her boss shocked him profoundly, indefinitely. But who could do anything with Beryl, once she caught an infatuation? He ought to know better by now than to try.

With an effort he sought to throw himself into the exhilaration of the crowd around him. It formed a murmuring mass, explosive every second with admiration as it moved in the keen autumn night-air from one glittering set-piece to another, the rounded wonder in a child's eyes, the crude red of a girl's coat, the blue of a male throat-muffler catching the light for a moment before receding into shadow again. The themes illustrated upon the cliffs were the simplest, the most universal in the world. Cinderella's crystal coach revolved its golden wheels eternally in place. The Babes of the Wood slumbered under trees from which flights of robins appeared and disappeared with mechanical regularity to drop their offering of scintillating leaves. Elves and gnomes danced rondos amid blossoms of unfolding fire; hunters in blazing pink rocked continuously over the same five-barred gates; Dutch maidens trundled iridescent hoops beside canals of rippling flame. A tram-car disguised as a gondola swayed along the front, and, arousing cries of ecstasy, an aeroplane outlined in diamonds swooped over the kiosks of Central Pier, and fled like a meteor, past the coruscating windmill, towards the distant, many-tinted, Kubla Khan pavilions of the South Shore pier. From the crown of the jazz-striped Tower swung a searchlight that irradiated now the mysterious sea, now the ghostly grey roofs of the town, now the indefinite, flat, rural hinterland enshrouded by the night.

Ordinarily Peter Warner would have vied with any child in delight at the fun and glamour of the gorgeous transformation scene, but this evening he found he could not keep his thoughts for long off Beryl. He was very fond of his temperamental sister, though he doubted whether she returned his affection with equal warmth. Once again the figure of Grigori Zharkov rose before him, blotting out the splendour of the illuminations—the heavy, rounded shoulders, the thick legs, the drooping, yellowish face with the cold eyes boring into you. . . . From what part of Muscovy and from what social background this Russian Jew had come to England no one knew. He had arrived an unexplained "refugee" from the convulsions following the War and the Revolution, but he had not arrived with empty pockets. His musical gift consisted in the ability to whistle the rest of a popular tune after listening to the first bars, and to vamp the melody of any piece that had been played through once in his hearing. Yet he aspired to be recognized as a master musician; boasted of his violin-playing, though his coarse fingers made his bowing execrable; and posed as a sublime conductor, though it was fabled that one day the leader, worn out by his tantrums during rehearsal, had threatened that if he were not careful, "we shall follow your beat, Mr Zharkov!" He might throw "temperament" in Eastern European dialects all over the theatre and the board-room; he had, in Peter Warner's opinion, only one gift to mark him off from any fiddle-scraper in the band—a flair for the dollar and an iron clutch to hold it.

But what made Peter's blood boil whenever he thought of it was Zharkov's claim to be a composer. All Zharkov's so-called original compositions were deftly "conveyed" from the work of others. Some were blatant borrowings from old operas, oratorios, and even hymn-books. Others (and by far the most) were the work of needy young musicians whose scores Zharkov benevolently offered to "improve." A judicious course of small payments to the hungry composer and slight changes in the melody and orchestration effected by another set of "ghosts" gradually brought about the desired situation in which the piece could be brought before the public as the sole work of Grigori Zharkov.

And to think that Beryl, with her instinctive fastidiousness and her artistic discernment, should be captivated by the flatteries of such a man! Peter never had been able to understand the facility with which his sister fell for the lower masculine types. Sex appeal! No doubt it oozed from Zharkov's damp lips; and no doubt his slight, dragging, foreign accent was an allurements to nine out of ten pairs of feminine English ears. And yet of Beryl, with her ruthless intelligence, something better could surely have been hoped!

Peter paused at the foot of Victoria Street, and looked at his watch again. Up there lay his path, to the Palatine Gardens Theatre. It was time. With a sigh he turned his feet from the front and began to walk with ever slower and more reluctant steps towards the big theatre. He found his soul revolting absolutely against the thought of the performance—the long-drawn, first-night performance—he was doomed to sit out. The gilt was off the show business for him to-night. "Why," he growled to himself, "did Father give me a Pollock toy-theatre when I was a kid? I got it all wrong from the start. Without that I might have grown up understanding that the theatre is a business like cars or grocery, and not a dream made flesh. Well, it's too late now."

It was also, he realized, getting too late for him to be in his place at the Palatine Gardens for the rise of the curtain. But he could take the opening as read. . . . For that matter he could pretty well take the whole of *I Like You, Lady!* as read. He knew already every detail of what he was going to see . . . and suddenly he felt that he just could not bear to see it.

Polish! That was what he had to expect. Polish on the nails of the usherettes, on the brass of the orchestra, on the sleek head of the conductor. Polish on the chromium stage furniture, on the metallized scenery, on the timing and discreet suggestiveness of the wisecracks, on the monotonously regular lips, eyelashes, and coiffures of principals and chorus-girls alike. Polish flashing from the batteries of spotlights, exuding from the slick rhythm of the saxophones, polish that had nevertheless a quality—the "Inman touch," d——n him!

But Peter Warner—and by now his feet had faltered to a standstill—Peter Warner wasn't having any to-night. He wasn't going into

that show at all! After all, Beryl had given him quite enough for the couple of paragraphs he was expected to telephone through at about half-past eight. . . . A modernist *Faust* ballet . . . Lillian Green on her sunny sierra . . . Whirter and Carr, "I predict will have all London laughing at their newest absurdities. . . ." Oh yes, and for personal dope, "Bob Forshaw, Fizz's Chairman, hears of success in mid-Atlantic." That would be good enough for Athelstan Rigglesworth; and if he ever learned the truth, he could like it!

Peter Warner's behaviour may be left to journalists to appreciate.

CHAPTER TWO

I

WHILE fortifying himself in this resolve, Peter had been walking he did not much mind whither—so long as it led away from the Palatine Gardens Theatre. Now he looked up to see where he was, and found he was standing outside a red Victorian façade adorned with play-bills.

A smile broke over his lips. This was the old Emporium Theatre, one of Blackpool's most characteristic evolutions. It had its name from the fact that it had started life as a bazaar of fancy goods. Then an enterprising music publisher in the days before the vogue of the gramophone and radio had made it into a sale-room and concert-hall, where for "sixpence and sit where you like" the crowds could come and hear his publications sung. By degrees the humble platform of the singers had grown into a stage; the stage had changed the hall into a theatre—or, rather, two theatres, for Peter's father had told him how the concert party downstairs used to be interrupted by shrieks, groans, and the fall of plaster from the ceiling as "blood tub" dramas pursued their course in the gallery above; at last both had been merged in a single up-to-date theatre of varieties that had yet never lost the atmosphere of popular joyousness out of which it had been born.

How many mirthful hours Peter himself had enjoyed in the old Emporium he could scarcely count, and with a grin of happy reminiscence on his face, he read the bills outside the shallow vestibule.

"Vincent Gynn's continental revue, *Vanities of Vienna*," they announced in a rocket of variegated hues. "Mirth, Melody, Magic" they promised, under the direction of Vincent Gynn, "from the Gimcrack Theatre, Piccadilly, the Moulin Jaune, Montmartre, and the Steinkeller, Vienna," enhanced by the "personal appearance" of Vincent Gynn, "the compère with a violin," and bathed in the glamour of "Wanda Gynn and her Viennese Dancers." The rest of the artists appearing were judged to be adequately served by much smaller type, and Peter did not trouble to read the list right through, though his eye was caught and his spirit warmed to see among them the name of a friend, Jack Kelham, announced as "the ace of anecdote." Finally, he found himself warned against missing the "lavish spectacular scenes," including "Waltzes of dear Vienna," "Love's Rose Garden," and Wanda Gynn's "*Poses Classiques*."

There must have been some odd perversity in Peter's character, for from the moment that he read this bill he was just as anxious to see Vincent Gynn's *Vanities of Vienna* as he was determined to avoid the polished entertainment to which Arthur Inman (and Duty) were summoning him. He calculated that he would just be able to telephone

his spurious paragraphs through to London and get back to the Emporium in time for the second house; and so indeed he did; returning, a little breathless, but not at all conscience-stricken, in time to join the queue as it passed in for the 8.40 performance.

He was contentedly incurious about what was to come, throwing down his shillings carelessly at the pay-box, allowing himself to be pressed by the throng through the narrow doors on to the long, raked floor of the stalls, paying his twopence out of courtesy for a programme he had no impulse to read, and, like a rolling stone without ambitions in the moss-market, coming at last to rest in a seat near the front, close by the invisible orchestra. The orchestra is under the stage at the Emporium for the same reason that the circle overhangs the stalls far forward, the need to economize space. But perhaps that compression is what makes the warm intimacy of the place. Peter could already feel the expectancy of the buzzing crowd around him and over his head, and as he lit an inexpensive cigar and lazily studied the bright orange curtains and the dim modernist designs, like sticks of Blackpool Rock, on the proscenium walls, he felt quite sure that—whatever the fare to come—he was better off here than amid Inman's exquisite colourings at the Palatine Gardens.

The brief overture rattled itself through, and the tabs rustled up on a worn back-cloth, showing a view of Vienna, though Peter was close enough to detect beneath the spire of the *Stefanskirche* the half-erased outline of the Eiffel Tower and the inscription "Gay Paree!" Four short, muscular wenches in red boots—Central European, it seemed likely, if not indisputably Viennese—did steps that proved at any rate their energy and control of their limbs; then the remaining four danced Strauss waltzes with male partners insecurely uniformed as Austrian officers—among whom Peter fancied he recognized his friend Jack Kelham under the brow of a shako. In an odd way the scene had a sort of faded and tattered charm, a "quality," though miles apart from the quality that Arthur Inman put into his shows. It was as though years ago an artistic mind had designed both the dresses and the dances; and this flavour of "quality" was marked enough to make Peter regard with some interest the figure of Vincent Gynn himself, lean, white-haired, and stooping, with a broken-ridged nose and projecting teeth, as he came forward at the end of the dances playing a violin.

After a few bars he tucked the instrument under his arm, affixed a monocle by a black-satin ribbon, and welcomed the audience in a speech garnished with mildly naughty gags, acknowledging each laugh by a slow disclosure of his tusks and a gleam of his pale eyes. As compère it fell to him to introduce the succeeding acts; but his sophisticated smartness hardly concealed the truth that most of the programme was the banal stuff of touring revues. A noisy sketch in a kitchen was led by an elderly comic with hanging cheeks and upturned

nose, who seemed to agree with the audience in finding himself extremely funny; Mrs Gynn, immense, golden-haired, and more than middle-aged, paraded up and down in a frou-frou of short skirts playing the accordion; there was a brisk interchange of backchat between a midget and his two tall partners, dressed as policemen; an Indian magician, mysteriously silent, performed the rope-trick (or just as good!) to clashes of Eastern music.

II

Peter began to debate with himself—not whether he should go to the Palatine Gardens Theatre, but whether he should slip out to the cosy bar at the side of the circle, where all the interesting pro's in Blackpool were to be met. Interesting, in Peter's eyes, meant not necessarily the highly salaried or the highly talented (though you could meet them, too, there), but those observers and tasters of life in its rawness, absurdity, and conviviality who more often follow the primitive tradition of Thespis and keep to the road than they stagnate for long runs in West End theatres. At the same time they will certainly, if asked, profess themselves ready to abandon all that charms them in existence for the sake of a few more pounds a week in London. There, too, unless you were unlucky, you would find the impressive figure of the Booking Manager of the Emporium, twinkling inexhaustible kindness from behind his horn-rimmed glasses, and radiating more humour in the time it takes to drink a small whisky than most of the comics on his stage could in a fifteen-minute act.

But Peter hesitated from a scruple of good manners. Going out from a seat so near the front, he would be visible to the players; and he was sensitive enough to realize what that would mean to a performer in the full stress of "putting himself over." Artists of the concert party and revue order, especially, who have to create their parts out of their own personalities with small help from the author, sustained only by the little notebooks in which they keep recorded the quips of "Joe Miller's Gag-Book" and all the ageless jests that have made man laugh ever since he could speak—these artists work so hard to give the whole of themselves and the best of themselves at every show! Your straight actor may "walk through" a performance when he feels off-colour; Shakespeare, Wilde, Bernard Shaw work for him, even when he is not working for himself. It is not so for Dan Leno, Bud Flanagan . . . or Vincent Gynn and his Vanities of Vienna.

Peter's scruple was the scruple of an amiable nature. It came to him when he had already half-risen from his seat, and made him subside into it again. If he had not yielded to this scruple, if he had lifted himself right out of his stall and made his way over people's

toes to the bar . . . then perhaps all his fortune would have been different—who can tell?

At all events he would not have heard the voice, recognized, with a little shock of surprise, "quality"—a quite unusual quality—in it, and raised his eyes from dropping the ash of his cigar into a tray to look at the singer. . . . Well, surely she was "quality" herself, slim in her black, chiffon dress, from which her long neck emerged, supporting a narrow head that rose to a peak behind. The face was long, too, with vermilion-tinged lips and a pageboy bob of blonde hair falling on her shoulders. Peter looked and listened until, as she finished, the house, appreciative of good singing like any northern audience, came down with a crack of applause, and she stood bowing in the storm with a smile of a pleasant sincerity parting her long, subtle lips. Peter, for the first time requiring his programme, could not find it; but at last, unearthing and uncrumpling it, was able to read:

"7. GAIL DARIEN, *the Soul of Song,*
And a Man at the Piano."

At the same moment he heard her saying in a low, almost shy tone, "Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much. My partner would now like to play you Chopin's 'Nocturne in B Flat.'" The lights dimmed as she walked off the stage, and then a spot threw a romantic blue shimmer on the short, stout young man who sat bent over the keyboard, his white shirt-front reflecting the colour of the light. He looked up and sat waiting till the audience were intimidated into a silence without a cough; then lifted his hands high and struck the first notes.

"The Man at the Piano" was *not* "quality." In fact, his playing was showy and pretentious, with a touch of the amateur about it too. Peter disliked his face, also, with its round, sensual chin and sullen mouth. The eyes were better: they were bright and intelligent, but Peter hated the way they roamed over the theatre all the time he was playing, as if trying to elicit the applause. It came when he had finished, but reluctantly, and not much of it; and in response he sprang up with a half-angry gesture of his hand to announce—there was personality in his voice, if a disagreeable one—"Miss Gail Darien will sing the aria from *Madame Butterfly*," and slump down on his stool again.

While the girl was singing the aria Peter, closing his eyes, tried to analyse the merits of her singing. He judged that her top register was very good; she brought out her high notes—and she could reach very high notes—with strength and clearness. The middle was also attractive, with rich tonal colour—only the lower register was inclined to be harsh. Yet she had been well and carefully taught: the fullness

of her phrasing and her open chest notes were evidences of that. Peter was enchanted also by the purity of diction she gave to the words she sang. Somebody must have taken special care of that, and he wondered who her teacher could have been. Anybody who took the trouble that he did over writing the words for his songs must value that accomplishment of hers. If ever he had an operette of his own produced, he would like his verses as much as his music to be given full value—just like that. . . .

Anyhow, his judgment on singing technique was not an expert's; he admitted that what was appealing to him was a personal quality in this girl's voice. In spite of an atmosphere of aloofness that seemed to encircle her while she sang—Peter had smiled during her previous number at the icy contempt with which she declared herself "whirled in the tempest of Love"—there was something soothing and consoling in her voice that charmed away the irritations and frustrations with which he had entered the Emporium. He no longer remembered that he was a struggling journalist, subject to the tyranny of Athelstan Rigglesworth, with a career that seemed to have run into the sands already, and possessing no one dearer to him than a sister who was a perpetual worry. The landscape of life was tipped with gold again—because this girl had a sweet voice and was charming!

Peter gave a wry smile in the dark. He could almost hear Beryl saying, "Be your age, laddie . . . if you have an age beyond one year! It's time you stopped thinking every moderately attractive woman a goddess, and every theatre a temple of high art . . . gor' blimey!" He could see the wrinkling of Beryl's nose and the grimace of the lips which had become a habit with her, though it was already drawing lines round her mouth. To propitiate this absent censor, Peter, as Gail Darien came before the tabs to take her call, told himself that the sheen of her hair probably came from the peroxide bottle, that she was painfully thin, and that her forehead was too tall. (Of course, it was tall; that was what would chiefly mark her off from any dozen other pretty girls around her!) Anyhow, he concluded, it might be worth somebody's while to draw the attention of one of Fizz's scouts to Miss Gail Darien's voice.

The finale to the First Part had begun, "Love's Garden of Roses," and once again Peter was conscious of the tiny twist away from the shop-worn which Vincent Gynn seemed able to give to his presentations. The stout accordionist was back again, her silver-plated instrument gleaming crimson and purple in the shifting lights, while round her the girls in vigorous high kicks and whirling acrobatics displayed their hard, shapely calves, earning every penny of their salaries with no possibility of faking. They brought the Emporium down with them beyond all doubt; the approval was torrential; and Mr and Mrs Gynn, slipping into the centre of the tableau, appropriated it all with delight.

III

As Peter rose for the interval and made his way upstairs towards the bar, he felt unwilling admiration for Vincent Gynn. How had he secured these exotic and capable dancing girls for so much less than they were worth . . . for Peter felt sure that this was what he had done? That Mr Gynn was a skinflint a hundred details showed—the battered scenery, the shoes of the girls in their first dance not all matching, the hideous dilapidation of the props used in the comedy sketch. Yet both dresses and sets, including the elegant grey drapes used for front-scenes, had once been expensive, and Vincent Gynn had shown an eye when he picked them up. From what “dried-up” show, or what advertisement in the *Stage* or the *Performer*, had he bought them as a bargain? For Peter was sure that this also was the case. . . . And where had he discovered Gail Darien?

Peter by now had got through the crowd into the bar. He at once beheld the stately form of the Booking Manager in the centre of a happy circle. He observed also the aged comic, in the violently checked suit he was to wear at his next appearance, seriously consuming gin, and two or three of the dancing girls with cheap coats thrown over their finery. Peter was just awaiting a suitable moment to obtrude upon the group round Mr Boswell, the Booking Manager, when he was gripped by the arm from behind and a voice shouted “Well, well, well! The tide must be in early round North Pier! Look, Boswell, a live star-fish!”

Peter wheeled round laughing to meet Jack Kelham’s smile of world-weary amusement. His enormous pale face seemed to Peter more than ever the shape and colour of an egg to which his squat figure and out-turned feet served as the cup. The yellow hairs plastered across his forehead might have been wisps of straw that had clung to the crown of the egg, and the thin-lipped mouth drooping at one corner a crack that had been made across the shell.

“That gibe about the star-fish is stale, Jack!” Peter remonstrated.

“Ah! Then try my latest!” Jack drew from his evening-dress waistcoat a piece of paper, wrote on it, deliberately dropped it on the floor, and rubbed his shoe all over it. Peter could not resist picking it up and reading it. On it was written, “Why does a chicken cross the road?” “There you are!” Jack laughed. “My latest dirty joke!”

“But what on earth are you doing here, Doctor?” he continued. “Wouldn’t they let you in at the Palatine Gardens on your tram-ticket?”

“I preferred to see *your* show, Jack,” Peter assured him.

An immense seriousness fell over Jack Kelham’s Humpty-Dumpty face. “A good little opera, isn’t it?” he said. “We were to have opened at the Countess in Shaftesbury Avenue next week, only one of Vincentio’s backers wouldn’t cough up at the last minute.”

"Oh! yeah?" answered Peter. "Now tell me something you've imagined."

"S a fact," Jack assured him. "He *has* a friend in Town who keeps him running, though I don't know who it can be. Actually I had no intention of joining Vincentio; I'd almost got a theatre in Town to revive my romantic comedy—you know the one."

"*Beyond the Blues?*"

"*Beyond the Blue,*" corrected Jack gravely; then he grinned. "Call it silly nonsense, if you like; it's d——d good theatre, all the same, and any audience eats it up! However, the deal fell through, and Vincent offered, and as Nita said, 'It's always a trip to Blackpool and the oysters are in.' But we shan't stay with Vincent after he leaves here. I shouldn't have come at all if I hadn't wanted a word with Bob Forshaw, who's in Blackpool this week."

"But he isn't," corrected Peter. "He's started for New York."

"Avoiding the brick-bats, eh?" said Jack Kelham imperturbably. "Well, you must come round and see Nita after the show: you noticed she had a small part in the kitchen sketch?"

"Yes," lied Peter valiantly.

"She'd love to see you, but this interval's so short."

"I'd love to see her," assented Peter hesitatingly. "Only I sort of promised Beryl I'd look round at the Palatine Gardens after she'd finished."

"You'll have lots of time." Jack always knew everything. "Someone's just been round here who said they haven't got to the end of Part One yet. A regular cantata! We shall be out hours before they finish."

"All right, then, for a few minutes," Peter agreed and took leave of Jack. The bar had emptied, and Mr Boswell had, alas! carried his presence elsewhere, so Peter went downstairs again to return to his seat. He concluded as he went that if he stretched those few minutes so as to make the acquaintance of Miss Gail Darien—he had the card of the *Morning Gazette* in his pocket—that might be regarded as a professional interview.

The Second Part had begun by the time he reached the back of the stalls, and, not wishing to disturb people in their seats, he stood for a while watching a dancer with long chestnut curls, who was supply turning in a spotlight, with a rustle of sequin-sewn skirts and slim gold slippers waving in rhythmic movement. Peter was in the mood to appreciate this, seen through the lazy smoke of his cigar . . . but suddenly the band stopped with a crash of cymbals, the dancer pulled off the chestnut wig, revealing a cropped male head, and Peter realized with shame that he had been caught out by an unusually agile "female impersonator," described on the programme as "Diva Superba: the World's Mystery!"

Perhaps his annoyance at this a little soured Peter's response to

the rest of the entertainment. He did not bother to go down to his stall. He did not let himself be impressed by Vincent Gynn's pyrotechnics on the violin, even though their effect was heightened by a slouch hat and an opera cloak, as well as a back-cloth with a group of lounging listeners which Peter (if he had not known he was in Vienna) would have taken for a haunt of apaches in Montmartre. He did not applaud the versatile Mrs Gynn's efforts in "saxophony"; he cut old friends by hardly listening to Jack Kelham's anecdotes; and was particularly exasperated by the assurance of a soubrette with furibund red hair done *à la Strubelpeter*, a face both broad and impudent, and eyes that stared unwinkingly from a cavern of blue pencil and shading.

Glancing with a shudder at his programme, he found that this was "Bobo Baggaley, impressionist," and wondered why on earth she should add the handicap of such a name to her many other points of unattractiveness. "Thank yew, ladies and gentleman," she shrilled. "And neow a little impression of that favourite film-star, Deanna Durbin!" Peter could have told her that if Deanna Durbin had had a voice and a manner like that, there would never have been a market for impressions of her; but apparently the audience were not all of his mind, for there was vigorous, if scattered, applause at the end of her act, which she sought to stimulate by edging to the proscenium and standing bowing there. Peter concluded that there was a judicious and an injudicious element in this audience, and that the "ayes" unfortunately had it. Certainly Miss Baggaley seemed delighted as she bounced back for a call; and Peter fancied he saw her trying to steal another, but the stage manager closed the tabs almost on her face. . . .

"Bobo Baggaley!" muttered Peter. "What an idiotic name!"

IV

He would probably not have waited for the concluding *Poses Classiques*, having no lust to see the generous curves of Mrs Gynn, even in maillot, had not the programme added, "Singer: Gail Darien"; and as soon as the "King" had been played, he made as rapid a way as he could against the down-coming crowd from the circle to the pass-door in the bar, which was the only way to reach the back-stage. Jack Kelham was awaiting him there and led him down-stairs to the dressing-rooms.

"Here's Nita's room," he said and knocked on the door. "Nita, darling," he called, "are you decent? Mr Forshaw's waiting to see you."

There was an exclamation from within, and in a few moments the door was opened by a small, dark-haired woman wrapped in a

dressing-gown, whose manner of dignified welcome changed to a squeal of delighted recognition at sight of Peter. "Jack, you're the limit!" she cried. "But this is much better! How are you, Peter darling? Did you like me as the tweeenie?"

"Swell!" said Peter. "But I prefer you in silk-stockings parts, Nita!"

"Dirty old man!" she answered, glowing; "but come inside, come inside!"

Peter's admiration for Nita Kelham was limitless. She wasn't beautiful, but it was true that she had lovely legs in tights. She could sing a small number, dance a short routine—even with mild acrobatics, though they hurt her dreadfully nowadays—play a little comedy part, and knew her job as assistant stage manager. She had the kindest heart on earth, though she could fly out at her husband like a little cat—and did; she was always practical, while he was too often . . . well, *Beyond the Blue*. She had never known freedom from money worries, seldom had a complete set of smart clothes, had almost forgotten, in cheap theatrical lodgings, what a comfortable home meant.

To Jack she was utterly devoted, and as there was no child to divide her care, he was spoilt. She provided a memory for him, so that he did not miss his appointments; indeed, he was marked out in the profession as the man who never had been more than three-quarters of an hour late. She teased him out of insane enterprises, flattered him out of the comedian's black despairs, gave him all the comfort that was possible in a touring life and a little more. She listened to Jack's soliloquies, endorsed his theories, execrated his enemies, welcomed his friends—never making a mistake about the moment when the same person had passed brusquely from the one category to the other—applauded his performances, and went on laughing at his jokes. "Laugh, you!" she had once whispered reproachfully to Peter Warner. "Haven't I laughed at that one for twelve years?"

"The Doctor's come from London to notice *Vanities of Vienna* in the *Mortician's Monthly*," said Jack as he followed into the dressing-room.

"What?" cried Nita. "You mean to say you haven't been to the Palatine Gardens?"

"I preferred your show, dear."

"You should have seen it before Jack took it in hand!" declared Nita. "Tatty isn't the word! . . . And jokes I'd never let Jack make. . . . Sit down, Peter! Never mind those things! Push them off on to the basket!"

"I thought it was a splendid little show," said Peter, obeying. "All except the insufferable young woman who makes you want never to see your favourite film-star again."

"Shocking, isn't she?" said Jack with the gravity of a cathedral verger. "But it's a clever act, all the same. She'll get on."

"She'd better change her idiotic name first," answered Peter. "Bobo Baggaley! What a phony!"

"Believe it or not," said Jack Kelham; "that's the cutest thing she ever thought of."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, *you've* remembered her 'idiotic name,' as you call it, to-night—though you've probably been only too glad to forget everything else about her. And when you next pass the bill of any show she's in, you'll say, 'Oh! that girl with the silly name—I remember her!' And if she's ever mentioned in one line of a notice by Athelstan Rigglesworth or Harry Jenner in the *Wire*, you'll remember that line—for the same reason. And in newspaper offices and bars people will be saying, 'How did she come by that name? Is it her own, or did she make it up?' And so, pretty soon everybody will be saying, 'That little girl's one of the coming ones!' Oh yes, Bobo has great things before her."

"And quite a bit behind her!" suggested Nita.

"Quite so!" assented Jack. "The bustle's coming in again."

Nita changed the subject. "What did you think of our little sop, Peter?" she asked.

"Your soprano? Rather remarkable," answered Peter with careful coolness. "Where does she come from?"

"I got her the engagement," asserted Jack.

"Really!" protested Nita. "She and Derek had been in the show for months before we joined."

"Well, *we* shan't be in it for months . . . or even weeks," replied her husband. "Come in!"

An authoritative rap had fallen on the dressing-room door and Vincent Gynn entered. He gave a sharp glance at Peter, and Jack Kelham hastened to introduce his friend. "Peter Warner," he said, "representing the *Morning Gazette*."

"Pleased to meet you." Mr Gynn smiled toothily. "I expect you know Athelstan Rigglesworth?"

"Oh yes," said Peter. "I'm more or less filling his place to-night."

"I should have thought you'd have been doing that at the Palatine Gardens." Vincent Gynn looked at him curiously out of his gooseberry-coloured eyes.

"I ought to be there," confessed Peter.

"But he gave us preference over Fizz," announced Jack Kelham proudly.

"I've nothing against Fizz," said Vincent Gynn, "except that I do wish they wouldn't send Inman snooping into the back of the pit at my shows, to pinch my ideas. I told Bob Forshaw, 'If you're short of ideas, *ask* me for them! I've plenty to spare!' I'm told he's

boasting that this latest thing of his at the Palatine Gardens is the biggest show ever put on at Blackpool."

"Is he?" cried Peter hotly. "Then tell him, Mr Gynn, that Jack Taylor can put a bigger show on a pocket handkerchief than he could on the stage of Drury Lane!"

Mr Gynn smiled palely again, and turned to Jack Kelham. "Look Jack," he said, "here's the revised list of dates. Get them duplicated and have one put up on the notice-board to-morrow. Good-night, Mr Horner," and he withdrew.

Jack studied the list he had been given with bent brows. "Long-welly—that's practically Swansea . . . Highgate . . . Preston," he murmured. "They couldn't arrange it any other way, could they? Nita, write to Mrs Peterson at Swansea to-night to see if her digs are free. Week after at home, and I'll phone Mrs Wade at Preston myself in the morning."

"Jack," enquired Peter, "you wouldn't by any chance be stage-managing this tour?"

"Sort of," conceded Jack.

"For one week only?"

"Shut up and give the Missus a chance to get changed," replied Jack, hustling him into the passage. "I'll take you along meanwhile and introduce you to Gail Darien. I could see you'd got high blonde pressure, the soppy way you looked when Nita mentioned her name."

"Well, she's a dear girl, anyhow!" Nita called after them. "See you in a few minutes, Pete!"

Outside the dressing-room door the two men found their way barred by Vincent Gynn, who stood conversing in a strange language with a large-sized female swathed in a heavy overcoat with false astrakan trimmings. It was not difficult to recognize Mrs Gynn, who seemed to make up more strongly for the street than for the stage. Her eyebrows were Robeyesque, and she appeared to have painted a full-blown rose on each cheek. Vincent Gynn introduced Peter, to whom Wanda gave a sour smile, murmuring at the same time to her husband in the foreign language she had been speaking before.

Vincent turned to him. "My wife," he said, "asks if you know Athelstan Rigglesworth. You do, don't you?"

"I have that pleasure. Is Athelstan a favourite of Mrs Gynn's?"

The Manager's face went stony. "Far from it. *Very* far from it!" he murmured. "But I forced him to withdraw his words," he added.

Wanda Gynn again broke out vehemently in her foreign tongue; then with a curt bob to Peter marched along the passage and flung open the door of the chorus-room. A noise like the parrot-house at the Zoo streamed forth, and Peter caught a confused glimpse of oval brown eyes reflected in a mirror, of a ravishing leg in a black-silk stocking being lifted for examination, and of a third girl tossing back a mass of dark ringlets while she wiped her face with a crimson-

streaked towel. Mrs Gynn went in and closed the door behind her, and there was silence, as when the head-mistress enters a classroom. "Those girls are more trouble than they're worth," grumbled Vincent Gynn. "My wife," he explained to Peter, "recruits them young in her own country, fixes their dances, and brings them out in England. And does she get any gratitude? They behave like a lot of monkeys!"

"Ilka again?" enquired Jack Kelham.

"Ilka again!"

"I thought it must be. I saw the chap in the bar this evening; he'd evidently followed us to Blackpool, and the reason wasn't hard to guess. I told him I thought he was behaving in a way that would be called most ungentlemanly in *me*, pestering a young girl like that——"

"But did you tell him we should get police protection for her?"

"Well, no-o."

"Why not?"

"When he's at home in his own town he happens to be a police inspector himself."

Vincent Gynn turned away with a grimace, and Jack and Peter went on along the passage, passing the female impersonator, who was even more perfectly dressed in masculine costume than he had been in the draperies of "Diva Superba," and who wished them a languid "Good-night" on his way out; passing the Indian magician, dusky and dignified, who stood by the door of a dressing-room with a cigarette between his lips, and as they went by remarked to somebody inside, "Did it look a bloomin' cert? I should say so! Why, the breezer was skatin' it at the distance, bloomin' well skatin' it!" and down another flight of stairs, at the foot of which the stage could be seen, almost completely dark.

"Hulloa, Jack!" cried a strident voice, and they almost ran into a figure in plum-coloured trousers, a grey overcoat, and a turban made from a handkerchief of flashy design. Peter, recognizing Miss Bobo Baggaley, tried to get behind Jack; but his friend merely replied, "Hulloa, Bobby!" and did not offer to introduce him to the pushful impressionist. Peter was conscious that she stopped half-way up the stairs and turned round to look at him. Then Jack Kelham tapped on a door, and a woman's voice that Peter was on a sudden too agitated to hear distinctly cried "Come in!"

V

The dressing-room which they entered had nothing in itself to make Peter hold his breath. It differed little from the room occupied by Nita and Jack; in fact, was a carbon copy of almost any theatrical dressing-room in the world. There were the elongated strip of table against the wall, the oblong stretch of mirror above it, with electrics round the

frame, half of them burnt out, the broken windsor chairs, the single, tattered, velvet arm-chair that has served its youth and middle age as a prop upon the stage, the baskets, suit-cases, dress-boxes piled in corners. A half-pulled curtain against the wall revealed glimpses of tawdry finery hanging from pegs, with neat rows of shoes beneath them.

The arm-chair was at the moment occupied by a man with straggly grey hair, dressed in a seedy suit of professional black, who was drawing on a cigarette and staring through the smoke out of eyes like pin-points; but Peter scarcely noticed him. Gail Darien had risen from her seat by the dressing-table to greet the newcomers. She was already dressed to go home in a belted fawn overcoat with a blue-lined hood falling back on her shoulders. Her hair, massed on her neck, gleamed in the strong, white light, and caused Peter humbly to withdraw his suspicion about the peroxide bottle. Beneath the hem of her tartan walking-skirt her slim legs, hidden on the stage by her trailing gown, showed in biscuit-coloured silk. It was obvious that nothing she had on had cost much, but that everything had been chosen with a skilled clothes sense.

"Gail," said Jack Kelham, "let me introduce Mr Peter Warner, of the *Morning Gazette* and *Butchers' Bulletin*. He's come to Blackpool expressly to cut you up, dear!"

"Well, that's nice!" laughed Gail with the same frankness that had pleased Peter earlier in the evening on the stage. "Do sit down, Mr Warner; excuse the muddle!" She lifted the black chiffon dress she had done her number in off a chair to make a place for him, and then said, "Oh, I beg your pardon, let me introduce Dr Swing, an old friend." The doctor made a vague gesture of courtesy and seemed to sink back into his reverie. "The *Morning Gazette*," Gail continued; "isn't that Athelstan Rigglesworth's paper?"

"Oh, come, Miss Darien!" expostulated Peter. "He doesn't write the whole blessed paper, you know! The rest of us are allowed to contribute a paragraph or two on very special occasions—for instance, when we hear a voice like yours!"

She seemed pleased by his compliment, but made no comment. Peter was struck by her simplicity; she didn't call him "darling," as Bobo Baggeley would have done in the first two minutes . . . or lament that her voice had been off colour this evening, or accuse the orchestra of "killing" her. She was just gratefully pleased, and he could feel it.

"If I may say so, Miss Darien, you've had a very good teacher," he told her. "May one ask who he was?"

"Bernard Middlemast."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Peter. "I never knew he had taken to teaching! Dear old Bern Middlemast!" and Peter smiled as he recalled his youthful adoration for the famous tenor, who up to the age

of fifty had kept, not only his voice, but his figure, so superb in the white uniform of Ruritanian Hussar regiments or the blue and gold of British naval officers or the silk shirts and patent-leather riding-boots which musical comedy heroes alone wear for polo. So overpowering had been the personality of "handsome Bem Middlemast" that, when he upheld in speech and song the superiority of love on a crust over princes' palaces and millionaires' mansions, big business beaks would droop sympathetically in the stalls on first nights and tears melt the enamel from the cheeks of Dowager Countesses.

"A wonderful personality!" murmured Peter, and "A first-class teacher of singing!" asserted Jack Kelham. "It may not be generally known, but Bem used to give Caruso lessons whenever he came to London."

"Good heavens, Jack, am I expected to live up to that?" enquired Gail.

The dejected figure in the corner rose with a mumbled apology and felt for the buttons of its waterproof.

"Must you really go, Doctor?" asked Gail. "Derek will be sorry to miss you."

Dr Swing muttered something about "the last train" and let himself out, fumbling a little to find the door-handle.

Jack Kelham grimaced as he disappeared. "He'll be struck off some day," he remarked. "Did you see how his hand shook? Nice to have him dabbing at you with an injection needle!"

"Oh, he's not a bad old stick," said Gail. "He simply eats me up when I sing Tosti's 'Good-bye' to please him. If ever Derek or I have a pain when we're in this part of the world, we ask him what's the matter with us—"

"And he knows all the ulcers! Right! Where is Derek, by the way? I wanted him to meet Peter. Derek Vortigern's Gail's husband, you know, and . . . incidentally, as it were . . . her accompanist."

"Good you put in the 'incidentally,' Jack," said Gail with a gurgle. "You should hear him swear at being a 'piano entertainer.'"

Peter Warner felt a cold sinking at the news that the "Man at the Piano" was Gail's husband. If anything was to be done for her, a business partner or even a lover could be shunted out of the way. But a husband would surely claim, "Me, too!" and Peter couldn't see any future for that young man alongside Gail Darien. "What is Mr Vortigern's real line?" he asked.

"He used to be with the People's Theatre at Glasgow, playing repertory," answered Gail; "Shaw and Russian plays. He writes plays himself."

"Derek's true Bloomsbury," explained Jack cheerfully. "His plays have 'theatre' in them unquestionably, of the 'slice of life uncooked' school, you know. But they really are so highbrow that they burst through the flies of any normal theatre."

"That's what *you* say, Jack!" retorted Gail, the colour springing into her cheeks. Although Peter had formed no favourable opinion of Mr Vortigern . . . would not, indeed, have been sorry had there been no Mr Vortigern at all . . . he could not but admire the spirit with which she stood up for her absent husband.

"Don't get me wrong!" said Jack Kelham earnestly. "I *admire* Derek's stuff . . . tremendously. I like plays that give you something to think about afterwards. When Nita and I saw Derek's last, *Miner's Home*, at Glasgow, we argued till morning about it. We both agreed that the Second Act would have been the most gripping thing ever written, but for one thing that spoilt it absolutely."

"What was that?" demanded Gail, bristling.

"The lighting! You couldn't see the wife's face half the evening, and the shadows were thrown from the window and the door opposite at the same time. . . . Shocking! . . . I say, where is that lad of yours? It's getting late."

Gail glanced at her tiny wrist-watch, and Peter guiltily made the same movement. "Derek went to see Vincent," said Gail to Jack, and it seemed to Peter that there was apprehension in her look.

"Another row?" Jack Kelham's egg-face drew out as long as a table-spoon.

"Well, he's every reason to be mad!" Gail flashed back at him, her eyes dilating and shifting in tone from cloudy topaz to the blue of an angry sea. "The old rat-bag, after all his promises, has given us smaller billing this week than Bobo. . . . Of course, she's been at him again, she and her agent!"

"As a matter of fact," Jack assured her, "it was the printer's fault entirely. Vincentio isn't to blame at all."

"You *know* it's his doing!" answered Gail angrily. "You don't have to defend every filthy trick of Vincent's just because you're his stage-manager, do you?"

"You're talking nonsense, Gail," replied Jack with a heavily injured expression. "I happened to see the proof myself, and you two *were* in larger type!"

"Nerts, Mr Jack Kelham!" Gail protruded the tip of her tongue between teeth rendered even whiter than they were by contrast to her reddened lips; then she turned to Peter with a slightly wry smile. "That's the profession, Mr Warner. It's like this all the time. What a glamorous life!"

"Sounds to me much like a newspaper office," laughed Peter.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gail. "Here comes my straying spouse at last."

A heavy footstep sounded in the passage, and the door was flung open by Derek Vortigern. "I say, Gail," he began furiously, "what do you think—" He broke off and glowered at Peter Warner in a markedly inhospitable way.

"Derek," said Jack, "let me introduce Mr Peter Warner, of the *Morning Gazette*."

Mr Vortigern controlled himself and shook hands. "How do you do?" he said with a hard smile. "How's old Athelstan? I was lunching with him only a week or two ago at the Cannibals."

"Oh! Rigglesworth stands where he did," answered Peter. "He was coming down here for the opening of the Fizz show, but sent me in his place."

"Have you come on from there? What's it like?" enquired Derek. "I'm afraid I—I—came to the Emporium instead," confessed Peter.

"Good heavens, Gail! We are flattered, aren't we? Can't say I share your taste, Mr—er—I hope you liked my Chopin, though. If you could recognize it on that piano! I defy Moiseiwitsch to get music out of such a rattle-trap!"

"I enjoyed it very much," said Peter politely, "and also Mrs Vortigern's singing. I can't remember when I've heard a voice that impressed me so much. I'm a little bit musical myself, you know."

"My goodness, Gail," said her husband, "there'll be no holding you soon, will there?" He turned back to Peter. "Lucky you came to see the show this week, Mr—er——"

"Warner," murmured Jack Kelham.

"Yes? Well, after Saturday the *Vanities of Vienna* will have to do without us probably."

"Derek!" exclaimed Gail anxiously. "You didn't——"

"Didn't I? 'We're walking out,' I said. 'You can't,' he had the cheek to tell me; 'you're signed for the run.' 'You've broken a contract I ought never to have made,' I answered, 'and that sets me free!' My G—, I was mad, I can tell you!"

"How did he explain the billing?" asked Gail.

"Said it was the printer's error."

"It was," put in Jack Kelham earnestly.

"I told him those celebrated printers of his would bring him bad luck one day soon, and he could either rectify the 'error' next week, or——"

"And did he say he would?"

"Well, he knows what will happen if he doesn't," growled Derek.

"I'm sure this can't interest Mr Warner . . . the way the other half lives! Staying long in Blackpool, Mr Warner? I suppose not. Why should anyone who hasn't got to linger in this God-forsaken dump?"

"I don't take that view of Blackpool at all," laughed Peter. "I'm staying on two or three days, to enjoy myself . . . and I hope I may have the pleasure of seeing you and Mrs. Vortigern again while I'm here."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," murmured Derek perfunctorily, opening an oblong envelope on the dressing-table, and after a glance

at its contents, crumpling them into a ball and tossing them under the table.

"Why," suggested Jack Kelham, "shouldn't we all four and Nita forgether some time to-morrow morning at the Clifton for a drink?"

"Sorry we can't, Gail and I," replied Derek. "We're going riding on the sands to-morrow morning."

"But we've got to be back in the theatre by eleven, Derek, in any case," remonstrated Gail, "for that call!"

"You won't be more than half an hour at the call," Jack assured her. "In fact, you can't be, because . . . I forgot . . . I've arranged an audition on the stage at eleven-thirty with a bit of local talent."

"Then when *will* you get away?" asked Gail.

"It'll be all right; I'll give her twopence to buy a cornet and pack her off. Look! Let's all meet at the Clifton at twelve sharp."

"Very well," said Derek. "Only settle *something* for God's sake."

"Yes, twelve," repeated Jack. "If by any chance I *should* be a bit late, don't bother. Actually, I've just remembered, I must meet Jim Hollis on the South Pier at twelve. . . . Well, better say twelve-thirty at the Clifton, perhaps."

"Well, be on time, then!" Gail warned him. "We lunch at one, and she gets mad if we come in late."

"Excuse me," put in Peter, "but may I suggest something different? Will you all lunch with me at the Rotonda to-morrow? Then we can meet in the bar there whenever you're ready."

"Very kind of you," said Derek, thawing a little.

"Ye-es," said Jack, after weighing the momentous proposition. "Ye-es. The Rotonda . . . I'll ring George to keep us a table. Nita-a-a!" he went to the door and shouted. "Oh, here you are!" he said as his wife appeared, dressed for the street. "We're lunching with Peter at the Rotonda to-morrow."

"Oh, Jack!" cried Nita despairingly. "You *know* we promised Tony Rutherford and Valerie to lunch with them at Hill's."

"Not to-morrow!"

"You said Tuesday would suit, and told me to phone them!"

"Did I? Well, I'll ring them and say Vincent's called a late rehearsal, and can't they make it Wednesday instead?"

"Oh, not *Wednesday*, Jack!"

"Why not?"

"There's something, I know."

"Bring your friends along to the Rotonda, Jack, if they care to come," said Peter patiently.

"Pygmalion!" replied Jack; "I'll fix it somehow. . . . I say, I must get dressed! Good-night, Peter! Good-night, Derek! Good-night, darling!" and he whirled away, sucking Nita after him in the draught.

"Ouf!" said Derek. "Shut the door, please, Gail! . . . and he won't turn up at the Rotonda, you know, after all. Sit down again,

Mr Warner." He offered his packet of cigarettes. "So you thought our little act went over well, did you? It's a bit over their heads here, but I won't play muck to them. Let them learn!"

"Quite," agreed Peter. "I think myself that your wife's voice is one the West End ought to hear."

"Well, it's exceptional for us to work anywhere else. . . . Perhaps you saw my one-act play *Fair Wage* at the Theatre of the Future Club in Charing Cross Road?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I missed it. As I was saying, Mrs Vortigern—"

"Mrs Vortigern was very woolly on her top B flat to-night. You've got to watch that, Gail!"

"I know, I know!" she answered.

"I was wondering"—Peter raised his voice—"whether there mightn't be something for her with Fizz."

There was a dead silence in which both their heads turned towards Peter. Then, "You in with Fizz?" Derek enquired with a little catch in his voice.

"Enough to put up ideas to the right quarter."

"That's Zharkov, eh?" said Derek. "Great chap, Zharkov! He promised me personally to give Gail an audition as soon as we get back to Town, and what's more, I hope to persuade him to read my '*Lenin, a Drama in Revolutionary Biography*.' Fizz put on straight plays sometimes, if they're the right sort—"

"I'm afraid," interrupted Peter, "I can't help you with Zharkov. But I'm pretty intimate with a man in the Fizz offices at All-Star House, and if you'd like me to drop a word to him—"

"That's terribly thoughtful of you, Mr Warner!" cried Gail, a shell-pink colour stealing into her thin cheeks under her make-up.

Peter rose and put on his overcoat. "That's settled, then. I'll be seeing you to-morrow."

"Oh, must you go?" said Derek. "Well, it is time Gail was in bed if she's going to be up and out by nine galloping over the sands after me. I don't stop for anybody."

"Where do you ride?" asked Peter casually.

"The stable's near South Shore," answered Gail. "And we go vaguely in the direction of St. Anne's. . . . What horses did you ask for, Derek?"

"Same as last time we were here. Rosie for you, because she's an old arm-chair even you can't fall out of. And Jester for me again."

"Oh, Derek, do be careful! He's so hard to hold!"

"Nonsense! Good G—, Mr Warner, this girl's trying to make you think I don't know how to ride a horse! When we were touring in Ireland, I used to go round the Leopardstown course—"

"Good-night, Mr Vortigern," said Peter abruptly. "Good-night, Mrs Vortigern; I really must be off!"

When he had made his way with difficulty through the front of the Emporium and found somebody to unlock a door to let him out, Peter realized that, however long *I Like You, Lady!* might have taken to play on this its first evening, Beryl would by now have given him up and gone home. "Never mind," he thought. "I'll ring her up in the morning and ask her to join us at lunch."

CHAPTER THREE

I

PETER WARNER was not by habit an early riser, least of all at Blackpool at the end of the season. Surely there was the place, and that was the time to relax? Blackpool in October meant for him the luxury of late breakfasts, oysters consumed in panelled bars during the leisures of the timeless, carefree morning, the noontide drink sipped lazily in lounges humming with that native Lancashire humour which beats all that even Lancashire comics can devise upon the stage—one reason, perhaps, why Blackpool is notoriously such a difficult town to play.

It meant such unexacting exercise as sauntering upon the front, trying to penetrate the misted horizon where the sea, already tinged with Northern mystery, melts into the indeterminate sky; poking about in red-brick by-streets, with their green-edged gables and spotless lace curtains; tracing the endless perspective of "Braemars," "Gleneagles," Balmorals," and "Mon Repos," each with its great majolica or brass flower-pot in the front window, and its inevitable, down-at-heel park bench outside; pausing to meditate the moral of the upstairs restaurant turned Mission Hall on the Sabbath only, with its invitation, "Come on Sunday—Jesus Loves You—Tripe Supper." It meant lingering on Central Pier at sunset to watch the line of low houses opposite, terrace upon crude terrace, dissolve into a symphony of rust-red, oatmeal, and faint primrose tints, while to the south the switchbacks, wheels, and towers of Pleasure Beach changed to a world of Wellsian fantasy, and on the northern cliff the greenish-yellow baths survived as a pale note upon the ridge of dusky buildings. It meant, in short, days of glorious idleness, late-started and late-ended.

Yet on the morning after his visit to the Emporium Theatre, Peter was up and out upon the sand of South Shore a little after nine o'clock. No doubt his early rising brought its reward. It was a delicious autumn day, crisp without chill, steeped in a golden haze that trembled into shimmering blue satin just where the Tower, a grey and vaporous filigree, pierced through its gauzes. Along the South Shore the little Victorian lodging-houses were blurred to wraiths, the posters decking the façades of the show-booths hung like faded banners, the inscriptions on hostelries and bars glimmered like tarnished brooches, and along the far-away North cliff the pompous array of mansions and hotels had dwindled to a line of war-worn red coatees. The city of pleasure was caught in pensive mood.

But it was not to enjoy this contrast from the brilliance of last night's illuminations that Peter was at the present moment filling his shoes with sand and ruining their suède by padding along through grit

and puddle. It was because last night a girl with a long face and a fugitive resemblance to a Botticelli Madonna when she put her head to one side had announced that she would be riding here this morning. Peter hurried along past the pier, past the great Open-air Bath, glancing with his keen eyes in all directions, but so far he had not seen the two fast-moving specks he was looking for. His eyes lit on nothing more exciting than senna-coloured sprawls of seaweed, rare groups of children dragging nets on poles along the creaming edge of the sea, and occasional cars that whirled by on the parade.

Actually the riders came on him from behind, where he had not been looking for them: they had started later than he had expected. Derek Vortigern passed first, bumping like a little ball on a big, dark-coated horse with a rolling eye, an old hat of green felt pulled down on his forehead. Gail followed on a placid-looking strawberry-roan mare, her hair streaming over the collar of her soft shirt, tied with a reddish-brown tie, her figure slimmer than ever in fawn coat and jodhpurs. Peter, who had learned something about riding through the good offices of his cavalry brother, realized, even as he admired her appearance, that her hand was far too slack on the reins and her graceful seat, swaying to the horse's motion, quite insecure in case of any skittishness. But her present mount was not the sort for that, and at sight of Peter she pulled up with ease, while her husband's hard-mouthed beast carried him swearing many yards past the spot. Peter judged him an incompetent horseman, but admired his pluck in tackling such a beast, and his respect for Derek went up an unwilling inch or two.

"I say!" Derek shouted to him. "Lucky we ran across you! Jack phoned us early this morning, and it's all changed. We're meeting at the Clifton after all, not later than twelve-thirty."

"Well, he didn't bother to phone *me*!" protested Peter.

"I expect he forgot."

"Oh, well! Never mind. . . . Good morning, Mrs Vortigern. Having a nice ride?"

"Lovely!" answered Gail. "I adore Rosie; we understand one another."

As she shook the golden cloud back from her cheeks, while behind her the sun played caprices with the mist, shredding it to display sweeps of grey-blue sea, then swiftly covering them again, she, her mount with its romantic, flowing mane, and the visionary ocean behind her, seemed all parts of one unreal picture. Could that hair and those bright cheeks belong to the same world as the two sallow-faced children with bedraggled panties who were gaping at her from the water's edge, or the bunched-up group of visitors at that moment descending a stair to the sands in drab procession?

"Jack's impossible!" said Gail smilingly. "I hope he hasn't put you out—"

"Good Lord, no!" interrupted Peter. "I'm well used to it. And besides, Jack's the best buddy in the world and Nita's the salt of the earth!"

"Yes, they're both darlings!" assented Gail.

"Master Kelham's a bit too managerial for my taste," growled Derek. "The funny little man seems to think he can teach *me* something about the business! . . . Stand still, will you, you brute?" And he wrenched on what was fortunately the iron mouth of his horse.

"You'd better let him go, Derek!" cried Gail apprehensively.

"Don't tell me how to manage a horse!" Derek snapped back, throwing his heavy little body back upon the reins. "So long, Warner! Remember, the Clifton, twelve-thirty *punctually*!" and he let his horse go.

It seemed to Peter that Gail had wished to linger to say something more to him. Her mare, however, courteously but implacably decided to keep up with her stable companion, and disregarding Gail's silken pull on the reins, took her away to rejoin her husband at an equable canter. Rosie might almost, Peter fancied, as he stood looking after her, have wished to give him a hint about the proprieties. She had had something of a spinsterish expression, he thought, for all the glamour of her mane and colouring.

Gail appeared for a moment to have the intention of turning in her saddle to wave good-bye to Peter, for he saw her take one hand from the reins and make a slight movement of her shoulder. But she thought better of the feat, and allowed Rosie to carry her on at a quickening pace behind Derek. Peter stood watching her flying figure, as it was borne into the distance over the expanse of sand, and wondered if it was characteristic of her thus smilingly to let herself be carried along by a stronger will than her own. . . . Now he could see her hair tossing to the rhythm of the gallop into which the mare had broken in its endeavours to draw level with the strong, eager horse in front, and for some time still her golden helmet flashed at moments through the mist. Then her form began to dim, as the haze enshrouded her and the dark blot ahead which was all that could still be seen of her husband. For a moment Peter was flooded by a melancholy sense of her elusiveness. Could she ever be made captive? Was she earthy enough to be held? He stood still in the same place, straining his eyes into the now empty distance . . . until his thoughts were sharply distracted.

Distracted by a tune . . . the master-phrase of a tune! This was the way songs usually came to him . . . and as a rule it was when his feelings had been stirred. For a second his cheeks grew hot. Was he not old enough yet—twenty-six!—to be inoculated against theatrical glamour? But this enigmatic autumn sunshine, after all, was no spotlight, and Gail was as good in it as on the stage. . . . Ah! there was that tune again, pressing to be defined as painfully as a baby

pressing to be born. Peter began to stroll towards the sea, whistling the phrase that was playing hide-and-seek in his brain. . . . No, that would not do! It had come out this time as essentially a tune of Ivor Novello's he had lately heard. He had gone off his rails: he must try again—the tempo of a waltz, it had been. . . .

Churning up the sand with an already powdered toe, he told himself abruptly that this was all nonsense about Gail Darien. One had these seizures every so often . . . either about singers or about dancers. But how much deeper an appeal there was in a singer than in a dancer! You took her voice into your soul with an intimacy that the most exquisite movements of a ballerina could not achieve. (Peter's thesis is not worth arguing—had Gail Darien been a dancer he would have doubtless maintained the opposite.)

Gail Darien's voice! He could hear it again, soaring in the *Madame Butterfly* aria; and, drawing out a cigarette, he tried with half-closed eyes to bring it closer to him. . . . By gum! that was not *Madame Butterfly* she was singing now! It was . . . yes, it was *his* tune . . . the right one this time, lacking only a less conventional close. It was a riding song of a sort, with a galloping lilt . . . yet not of earthly hooves! A "Tally-ho!" song was not just the thing for Gail! . . . A course, with winged feet and silver bells, that carried her over purpletinged clouds, drumming past, receding, then bearing her back once again! . . . No, even that might be too literal. . . . Aha! A title had flashed into his mind, "Ridin' on a Star!"

Peter drew back as the wavelets washed round his shoes. He had been marching straight into the sea! He swung round on an equally unseeing course, while his lips moved, stringing rhymes together. . . . Ah! There was the tune again . . . a better close, though still wanting the little unexpected twist he sought! Whistling thoughtfully, he drew from his jacket an envelope with *Morning Gazette* on its back, and scribbled several bars on it with a stump of pencil before he realized that it was too blunt to make a mark. He had, of course, no knife with which to sharpen it, and swore softly at the faint breeze ruffling his hair. He continued, however, to move up and down by the prattling tongues of the sea, his head sunk on his breast, his feet shuffling. . . . But it was coming, "Ridin' on a Star!" was coming. . . . Peter did not notice that the mists had drawn up their curtains and the sun increased to brilliance; he did not notice the time slipping by until a shadow enveloped him and he found himself underneath the pillars of South Pier. Then he looked at his watch and realized it was exactly thirty-one minutes past twelve, and he ought at the half-hour to have been in the bar of the Clifton.

"Setting the mummers a bad example," he told himself as he walked up towards the promenade, smiling at Derek's insistence on his being there at "twelve-thirty *punctually*." At the top of the stair

he had the luck to find a roving taxi, and arrived at the Clifton close on twenty to one, wondering, as he strolled in, how long he would have to wait for his gay companions.

II

In the hall lounge at the foot of the grandiose staircase he met the reproachful gaze of four pairs of eyes. They were all sitting at a small table waiting for him, dressed with a care that betokened leisurely preparation. Gail (how had she done it in the time?) had exchanged her boyish riding kit for a blue costume, put on a new make-up in delicate pastel shades, and poised a halo-hat of black velvet on her carefully combed curls. Derek had on a smart wine-coloured suit, and his socks and handkerchief matched in a way that made Peter jealous. Nita wore a hat that set off her fuzzy black hair, and Jack looked (as Derek had said) "managerial" in his heavy overcoat, belted at the back.

"Aha!" he cried at sight of Peter, "the late Mr Warner!"

"We were just giving you up!" Derek said, reaching out for his teddy-bear coat which lay, with a scarf that also aroused Peter's envy, across the chair next to him. "I've an appointment, unluckily, at a quarter to two."

"Nonsense, Derek! Maisie can wait!" said Gail with a little grimace at him.

"That's what *you* think!" snapped Derek. "Well, are we going along to the Rotonda, then?"

"Let the poor man have a drink, first!" remonstrated Gail. "You've had two, you pig!"

"Oh, that doesn't matter!" Peter hastened to assure her. "I'm really very sorry I——"

"Jack!" asked Nita anxiously. "D'you think we'll get a table at the Rotonda?"

"You said you'd see to that, Jack!" said Peter.

"Did I? Well, it'll be all right if we don't waste any more time."

"Hang it all!" retorted Peter, stung at last. "It's only just twenty to!"

"Eighteen, I *think*!" corrected Jack, looking at his watch, and comparing it with the clock on the wall. "Time is money, you know, Doctor!"

"Well, anyhow——" faltered Peter. "Oh! Please excuse me a moment!"

Cutting loose from his party, he hurried to intercept a tall young man who had just come through the swing-doors from Talbot Square. He wore a light checked suit and a pearl-grey hat with a speckled band. He had a warm, brickish-coloured complexion, with two

crinkly, black dabs of moustache below a long nose with a nicely sculptured curve. There was plenty more of the same stiff, crinkled hair with a bluish sheen to it round his forehead, and his dark eyes were covered by horn-rimmed glasses.

"Monty!" called Peter, anxious to catch him before he disappeared into the bar at the farther end of the hall.

"Hulloa, old lad!" said the new-comer, turning at the sound of his name. "How are you? Comfortable at the Palatine?"

"You knew I was in Blackpool, then?" asked Peter, a trifle disconcerted.

"Course I did," answered Monty. "But you weren't at our show last night, you bad lad!"

"Well, no, I wasn't," said Peter, deciding to confess. "But don't spill the beans, Monty!"

"Not after the nice things about us in the *Gazette* this morning, I won't. I don't agree with Inman. I believe in a little story in the London papers after a 'try-out.' Sort of aperitive, you know!" He snapped his long fingers with a nervous emphasis. "Gives 'em an appetite!"

"That's just what I tried to do!" claimed Peter, not too truthfully.

"And did it, trouper! . . . A drink?"

"Not just now, thanks. Those people over there are waiting for me. But look, Monty, I believe I've found something that would interest Fizz very much."

"A comic?" demanded Monty with almost ferocious eagerness.

"No, old man, not this time, I'm afraid!"

"Oh!" Monty squeezed one of his tiny moustache tufts with a disappointed air. "What, then?"

"A soprano!"

"Ah! The blonde over there by the fire!"

"Quick, aren't you?"

"No, I just thought——" Monty was staring across the hall at Gail out of his large, saddish eyes. "Hardly pretty, is she? But striking! . . . Could be made striking! What's she doing now?"

"Actually, she's playing at the Emporium in *Vanities of Vienna*."

"Really? With Vincent Gynn, is she?"

"Couldn't you find time, Monty, to look in to-night and——"

"Sorry, can't manage it. I must get back to Town this afternoon. . . . Yes, she could be made striking, you know."

"It's her voice I'm interested in, Monty. I want her to be heard by somebody in Fizz. Mr Forshaw really is in America, isn't he?"

"Old lad, nobody knows where Old Bob is at any given moment . . . except Old Bob . . . and his secretary, Miss Easy. And I often tell *her* we'll find a pearl in her mouth one day!"

"Well, then, perhaps Mr Inman?"

"Oh, old lad! Inman's up to the eyebrows just at the moment!"

"But when the London production of *I Like You, Lady!* is over?"

"He'll be off for Christmas to his villa on the Riviera."

"What a nuisance!" Peter frowned.

"I observe," hinted Monty slyly, "that you don't suggest Zharkov giving your girl an audition."

"I wouldn't ask Zharkov to cart my garbage away!"

"Come! Come! . . . What? What? old lad? . . . Zharkov's a trouper!"

"I don't want to take Gail Darien to *him*."

"That what she calls herself?" Monty had produced a slim notebook, covered in crocodile, and was already jotting the name down in it. "When you get back to Town," he said, "why not bring her to see me? I don't claim to be a musician, I'm only a business wallah; but I know enough to give Inman or Zharkov an idea of her. Just give me a tinkle at All-Star House when it suits you."

"I'd be glad to do that. You're a good chap, Monty!"

"What would you do, chum? After all, it's business."

"Well, thanks most awfully. Now, I must rush——"

"Just a minute!" Monty detained him. "Since you're in Blackpool, why not go round and call on Wally Montrose?"

"Does the old boy live here?"

"Yes, and glad to see a visitor! Go and play him some of your things!"

"To Walter Montrose? I wouldn't dare!"

"Well, you know, if *he* likes a tune of yours you're as good as made. He's still the big noise in Percy Peel, the publishers."

"But I don't know him, Monty!"

"Look! While you're at lunch, I'll ring him up at his house, 'The Orpheum,' Whitegate Drive, and give you a bit of a build-up. I'll say you'll be around about four, shall I?"

"Swell idea! Seems to me you never let up doing good turns to people all day, Monty!"

"Yeah? I just suspect I was born soft," laughed the other. "Cheerio, old lad! And don't forget to bring your little singer to see Uncle Monty!"

As Peter hastened to rejoin the dispirited group of his friends standing where he had left them by the fire, a guilty thought came into his mind. The mention of Zharkov had recalled Beryl to him. He had meant to get in touch with her this morning at the theatre or her digs, and ask her to join his party, and he had forgotten to do so. . . . "What a *brother* I am!" he scourged himself; and then, "I'm terribly sorry for leaving you all in that rude way," he was saying, especially to Gail, "but you saw who it was, no doubt?"

They all stared blankly at him. "But didn't you recognize him?" cried Peter. "Monty Du Parc?"

There was still a puzzled silence, until Nita hesitatingly asked, "Jack, isn't he the partner in that act Duparc and D——?"

"Good Lord, no!" Peter interrupted, laughing. "He's Fizz's Press Representative!"

An electric current seemed to run through the group at the word Fizz. They fixed eager eyes on Peter, awaiting fresh disclosures.

"That's what he calls himself, at any rate," went on Peter, seeing that further explanations were expected; "but he interprets his job in a large way. It would be hard to say what his real position is; but you'll appreciate I'd have to be polite to him, even if he weren't one of the best fellows in the world and the most obliging."

They all nodded in perfect agreement, and Jack Kelham was heard to murmur to his wife, "Monty Du Parc, Nita; hasn't he changed? I didn't know him just now!"

"When did you?" asked Nita.

"Well," asked Derek, "do we lunch to-day?"

Peter began to bustle. "Let's get along to the Rotonda as quick as we can . . . I'll find a taxi."

"No, no!" intervened Jack. "You're all coming in my car. It's outside."

"Oh, Jack!" pleaded his wife. "I'm so hungry; I'd rather go in a taxi! Get our bus into a park somewhere near. Pete'll help you push."

"What do you mean—push?" asked her husband, outraged. "She's running beautifully this morning, and there's plenty of room for us all in her, if you sit on the petrol can, Nita."

"All right!" answered Nita. "Prepare to perish of starvation, friends!"

"Ha-bloody-ha!" answered Jack furiously, as he led the way out.

While the rest of them followed, Peter whispered to Gail, "I believe I have good news for you."

"Anything to do with Fizz?" she asked, her eyes dancing with sapphire lights called out by the colour of her frock.

"I'll explain at lunch," answered Peter as they went out into the street, and crowded with the others into Jack Kelham's car, which was drawn up by the kerb in Talbot Square.

Reverberating noises mingled with smoke came from it as, in tones suitable for controlling stage-crowds, Jack, with the cranking-lever in his hand, adjured Nita in the driving-seat to step on the accelerator. She touched it with a dainty toe, and was answered by a heavy clang in the bowels of the car, which thereupon relapsed into sullen non-co-operation.

"What the heck have you done *now*?" roared Jack, flinging back the bonnet with such fury that it sailed out into the square and dismounted a boy from a bicycle. His injuries seemed superficial; at all events they had not severed the vocal cords.

"Precisely!" said Jack, interrupting the torrent at last. "It is

understood that you will ride more carefully for the future. Nita, give him sixpence! . . . Oh, well, next time, sonnie! . . . Peter, pull up that cushion you're sitting on, will you? There's a ball of string somewhere underneath the seat. Give that cushion a tug. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Jack!" said Peter, standing amid clouds of dust, with one jagged half of the leather cushion in his hand. Gail was coughing into her handkerchief and Derek angrily brushing his coat.

"S all right!" Jack shouted to them. "I ought to have warned you. . . . Nita, put a stitch in it to-night!"

"Put a sock in it, Jack!" she retorted. "Why don't you get the car started, Jack?"

"What d'you suppose I'm doing? Crooning to it?" demanded her husband, looking up, empurpled, from the starting-handle.

"You mustn't stand here all day, you know!" said a tall Lancashire policeman, coming across the square to him.

"We're just off, Officer," said Jack. "I wonder if you'd be so kind as to give it a shove behind when I start the engine?"

"Come on! Come on!" said the policeman unhelpfully. "What's to do wi' car, like?"

"Well, you see, it's like this. . . . Peter, for God's sake give me that string! Can't you find it? . . . Ah! Thanks! Now we shan't be long!"

"Happen!" said the policeman sceptically.

"Have I ever told you a lie, Officer?" asked Jack with dignity. . . .

"Oh! *Damn!*" he shouted, with several other things, and danced with rage.

"What's broken this time, Jack?" came Nita's anxious voice.

"The string!" snapped Jack.

The policeman had been laboriously writing out a ticket, and now handed it to Jack. "Happen that'll teach you not to indulge in insolent behaviour on subsequent occasions! If you're not away with that car by the time I come back along here, it'll be soommons—dost understand?"

"*Soommons!*" Jack hurled derisively after the officer's wide, retreating back, his hand resting on the starting-handle. The car gave a sudden cough and Jack sprang into the air, nursing his wrist with a yell.

"Oh, Jack, dear! You said press the accelerator with my foot!" Nita wailed.

"My foot! Couldn't you see I wasn't ready?"

"Jack! Jack!" implored Peter, leaning out of the window as a painful palpitation of the car's heart became discernible. "There is a tide in the affairs of men——' Jump in! *Start*, for God's sake!"

"Righty-ho!" shouted Jack, taking one leap into the driving-seat; and "honking" savagely at a group of pedestrians, to supply his want of a horn, he produced a snail-like motion of the car—apparently by

dint of facial contortion. "We're off!" he bellowed victoriously, as they tottered round the corner on to the front.

"*Unberufen*—if you understand what I mean," remarked Derek.

III

Nevertheless they arrived at the Rotonda, and not so very late after all. They had no great difficulty at this time of year in getting a table; and Peter even flattered himself, as they entered the restaurant, lit by its long semicircular window, fronting the sparkle of the sea with an almost Mediterranean gaiety, that George, the stately *maitre d'hôtel*, gave one of his warming smiles especially to their party. However, as they moved towards the table that had been found for them, Peter had a shock. Happening to turn his head, he detected at a secluded table in the top corner of the restaurant his sister Beryl with Zharkov. They had apparently finished lunch, and their heads were confidentially close over coffee and apricot brandy.

Gail, who had gone ahead of Peter, turned round enquiringly at his hesitation, and with a murmur of apology he quickened his step to rejoin her. Beryl had not observed him, and Peter decided not to obtrude upon her *tête-à-tête*. But Jack Kelham showed less discretion. "I say, Peter," he called over Nita's shoulder, as they walked in single file towards the window-table at the far end of the curve to which a waiter was guiding them, "did you see who's over there at that—?"

"Shut up!" hissed Nita, kicking back at him with her heel, and his face at once assumed the expression of a diplomatic elephant.

Peter, as he placed his guests round the table, was glad to notice that a large pillar cut them off from the view of Beryl and her companion. He seated Gail on one side of him and Nita on the other, thus bringing Jack and Derek together opposite.

"I *must* have a word with dear old Zharkov before he goes," whispered Jack to his wife as he moved to his chair.

"Over my dead body!" answered Nita, and thrust the menu card into his hands to occupy him.

They ordered their lunch quickly, for all were famished; only Derek delayed matters by enquiring of the waiter for a number of dishes not on the card. The rest opened with sherry, but Derek selected the most expensive cocktail he could find on the list. While they waited for the drinks, Peter turned to Gail and said in a low voice, "The reason why I ran away from you all to catch Monty Du Parc in the Clifton was because I hoped to be able to arrange with him for Fizz to give you a private audition . . . and I fancy it's done."

"Really?" The sunshine, filtering through the marigold net-curtains that veiled the window, kindled the tawny lights in her eyes as she joyfully listened.

"Yes. It seems neither Forshaw nor Inman is available at the moment; but Monty would like me to bring you to All-Star House as soon as you are free, so that he can hear you sing himself. I'd bet on his verdict!"

"Sweet of you, Peter! But if you lost——"

"Don't say that!" retorted Peter with energy. "Never think along those lines! The copy-books are all wrong, you know, about the virtue of modesty! It gets you nowhere. People take you at your own valuation. . . . What are you laughing at?"

A long tray of *hors d'œuvre* had parted them, and as Peter helped Gail to make her choice, he tried not to feel irritable at the sound of Derek's vibrant voice asking, "No caviare, I suppose?" But he noticed that Gail was smiling in a secret, subtle way as she bent over her plate with a fork.

"What are you laughing at?" he repeated. "Tell me?"

She turned to him with an anchovy balanced on her fork. The secretive smile had broadened into her more usual expression of frank amusement. "I was only wondering, Peter, whether you've gone on that rule yourself . . . all your life?"

"And you don't believe I have?" He smiled back into her eyes, feeling a sudden leap in intimacy.

"Not for a moment! You're far too nice," she answered.

"Thank you!" said Peter, and looked round the table to make sure his other guests all had what they liked. After a few minutes he turned back to Gail. "I didn't tell your husband about the audition," he said. "He'd like to play your accompaniments, of course?"

"Not if he can get out of it!" answered Gail with her gurgling laugh. "He loathes being 'the Man at the Piano!' After all, you can't blame him. He wants to act . . . and in serious pieces, too, don't you, Derek?"

"Don't I what?" replied Derek, watching the waiter put a fillet of sole on his plate. "How sick I am of *sauce Hollandaise*! . . . Don't I what?" he repeated to his wife.

"Like to act in highbrow drama," she told him, and Peter laughed at the way in which she contrived, by a play of eyebrow, to suggest a heightening of her own tall forehead.

"If you mean," answered Derek, "that I prefer to act in something which might conceivably interest an intelligent listener, full marks to you!"

"Fizz, then, isn't likely to be of much use to you, Mr Vortigern?" suggested Peter.

"I don't know." Derek stared at him with almost a challenge in his eyes. "Fizz are after the big money, I suppose, like the rest of the world. They'd probably have sense enough to examine any project that showed a good chance of filling a West End theatre, even though it didn't provide the tired business man's cup of tea."

"They prefer the fresh business man's piece of sugar," interjected Jack Kelham.

Derek ignored him. "Take this fellow of yours," he said to Peter "this Dupont——"

"Du Parc."

"Well, whatever his name is. If he has any intelligence, he must see that the theatre can't run entirely on——"

"Its legs," suggested Jack.

"Jack, for G——'s sake!" said Derek. "You dazzle; one positively needs dark glasses when you're around! I was simply going to say Warner, that your friend might be interested in a triangle drama, mine called *Denis O'Callaghan*, in which I'd be ready to play the name-part. It's a story of the Glasgow Irish; pretty stark, but *observed*." He furnished more details, until the waiter changed the plates.

"Well, anything I can do, of course——" Peter murmured.

"Thanks. I'll send it you to read. . . . Just a minute, waiter! bit more of the *poulet* and a good deal less of the *au riz*, if you don't mind!" He smiled at his own irony, and, turning to Nita, plunged into gossip incomprehensible to an outsider about the *Vanities* in *Vienna*, a conversation into which Jack, too, was quickly absorbed.

"You're wrong," said Gail to Peter.

"Am I? What about?"

"You know what I mean. Derek's play is fine . . . honestly it is!"

"Did I suggest it wasn't?"

"Not in words, you didn't. But you can look a volume, can you?"

"I'm sorry." He changed the subject. "How long were you under Bem Middlemast's tuition?"

"Five years. I was only a kiddy when I went to him. I started training as a dancer, you know, acro and all that. But one day my teacher dropped me on purpose during an adagio, and when I'd done rubbing myself I went for her and hit her hard. That put paid to the dancing——"

"What a pity!" exclaimed Peter. "With your way of moving——"

"Oh, you're too flattering altogether, Peter! Well; I then went for singing as a 'juvenile,' and thought myself pretty good—until I went to see Bem Middlemast at his studio in Fitzroy Square . . . you know it?"

"No, I was never there."

"A simply marvellous place! The walls one mass of signed photographs from every musical comedy star of the last fifty years, I should think, and over the mantel-piece that huge painting of Bem in *The Princess of Peru* that used to hang in the foyer at Farney's Theatre."

"I remember it," said Peter in a hushed voice.

"And two grand pianos—Ehrards—glorious tone, both of them

Bem used to wear a claret velvet jacket and beret, and looked not a day older than twenty-five, so I used to tell him. He liked that."

"I bet he liked it. He was charming, wasn't he?"

"Not always! That first day—I'll never forget it! I arrived as up-stage as a child film-star in my best bib and tucker, and . . . let him have it! I used to be billed as 'little Irene Paterson' in those days—and I sang him my latest panto success. Well, I hadn't got through the verse when Bem stopped me by making a noise like thunder on the bass of the piano. 'O-o-oh! What's gone wrong with it?' I asked him. 'With the pianoforte, my dear?'—he always called it that—'With the pianoforte, my dear? Nothing! But . . . *you!* . . . Oh, my poor child!' And he sat with his head in his hands, groaning. So, of course, that made me howl——"

"Cruel of him!" cried Peter.

"Oh no!" said Gail, and her curls rippled in the chequered light from the window-curtains as she shook her head. "Bem was right—absolutely! You see, I hadn't been *singing* a note, just screaming! He was terribly upset when he realized he'd made me cry. He wiped my eyes with his own silk handkerchief—I can still remember the smell of the eau-de-Cologne—and petted me like a father. 'But whoever taught you to make that dreadful row?' he asked. I told him my teacher's name. 'That woman?' he said, shaking his fist at the ceiling. 'Oh, you unjust gods'—he had a way of talking like that—'Why . . . why . . . must murder always be punished as a crime?' And then he took me by the hand, just as if I were a kid of four or five, and led me very gently to the piano. And there he began to show me what singing was."

Peter grinned. "I can see it all!"

"Mother and I had a frightful row that night," continued Gail with a gurgle. "You see, I was determined to go on with Bem . . . I could *feel* he was right. But Mother wanted me to take another engagement at once. It was about the time when Dad began to be ill, and we really needed the money. But Bem wouldn't hear of it. 'That child,' he told Mother, 'doesn't sing a note in public for three years!' Then Mother went in off the deep end. She's always had a quick temper, and some people tell me she's passed a bit of it on to me. She told Bem he must be mad. 'You're right, Madam,' he said, 'I'm mad! That must be why De László painted that portrait of me over the fireplace there, and why they gave me that silver bowl on the table behind you on the five-hundredth performance of *Ducks and Dukes*, and put my name in the largest type on those programmes you see on the walls—that was in all my contracts, part of my madness! I did it all by being mad—wouldn't you like me to bite your daughter, Madam?' Mother screamed at that; she thought he really was cuckoo, and I was doubled up with laughter. Then Mother said I couldn't afford to be idle anyway, because we must have the money. So Bem walked right up the

room, turned, came down to her, and putting his hand on her shoulder, said, 'Dear Mrs Paterson, God didn't send either you or me into the world to collect money!' Well, it was easy for him to say that, wasn't it? He'd collected enough to last him his time. But in the end he got Mother crying——"

"Wonderful Bem!" ejaculated Peter.

"It was rather wonderful, wasn't it? Because Mother, you know, isn't exactly a soft proposition—though she's fearfully kind underneath, if you understand me. Anyway, Bem went on teaching me, though we couldn't pay him a penny at first, and I stayed under contract with him till two years ago, when I married Derek. They couldn't get on. I was sorry. But, after all, Bem was only my teacher; Derek's my husband."

She broke off and looked across at Derek, who was at that moment arguing with the other two about repertory theatres. The names Bristol, Birmingham, Malvern, the Old Vic, Lilian Baylis, and Barry Jackson were being bandied to and fro with heat.

Gail made one or two mischievous interjections, which were ill-received; then, as the waiter placed a generous slice of peach tart with whipped cream before her, she protested to Peter. "You can't really care about my career! What do you think this will do to my figure? . . . No, don't let them take it away! . . . You know," she went on, "talking of looks, I learnt a great deal from Bem besides singing. The first morning, for instance, I came galloping in, mad keen to begin my lesson. He got up off his stool, where he had been sitting playing one of those charming things he used to make up as he went along and could never remember afterwards, and took me right back to the door. 'Look! my child,' he said. '*This* is the way to enter a room! You must learn some day how to walk on the stage, so you may as well walk properly all the time.' And, believe it or not, that was my first lesson! I didn't sing a note. It was just walking in and out of that studio, and curtsying to Bem . . . an hour of it, if you please!"

"You didn't see the fun of that?"

"I got so tired that at last I began to scream at him. But he only sat down and crashed chords on the piano to drown the row I was making. So I soon got tired of *that*, too! Then he said, very quietly, 'Understand, my dear, I won't have ugly things in my room, or in my life. I never have! Ugly looks . . . and by the way, you can come without that orange lipstick to-morrow . . . ugly voices . . . ugly movements . . . yes, and ugly actions, they won't do for Bem Middlemast. So, here and now, my child, you can choose. Either pick up that satchel and that litter of music which are making my floor untidy, and walk straight out, or stay and do . . . what I ask you to do!'"

"And, of course, you stayed."

"You bet I did! I should have, anyhow; but the way he smiled when he said 'Do what I ask!' not 'Do what you're told!' sort of got

me. . . . I was a silly kid in those days. . . . Anyhow, I learnt to walk."

"And to make curtsies?"

"Proper court curtsies—yes! Bem always got mad if you bent your head when you did them. 'Rise like a goddess coming out of the sea!' he used to say. And he said there was a right and a wrong way of sitting down and standing up, of lying on a sofa, and of coming down a staircase. I remember we spent the whole of one long, cold morning on the stairs outside the studio practising that, with the milkman and the postman and the rent collector going up and down and bumping into me, but Bem didn't seem to notice they were there. Thank you!"

She accepted the cigarette Peter offered and lit for her over the coffee and murmured again, "Oh yes, there was a lot you could learn from Bem! He arranged flowers in bowls beautifully, and yet there was never anything the least little bit nancified about *him*. And there *was* something in what he said about not caring for money. He once refused £300 a week to sing at the Stadion, because the actors of his age thought it *infra dig.* to appear in a variety programme—only think of it!"

"We've seen a change," Peter murmured, and, conscious that he had been bestowing a little too much attention upon a single one of his guests, turned to speak to Nita. But she did not hear his remark. With her body tense and an explosive energy that would have been appropriate to a woman whose honour had been impugned, she was calling across the table to her husband, "No, Jack! *No!* It wasn't there at all we met them! It was at Belfast, I tell you, *Belfast!* Don't you remember the lanky thing who used to come into the stalls bar every night? We called him the——"

Peter suddenly perceived his sister, followed by Zharkov, passing along the blue curtain that cut off the back part of the restaurant towards the door, her profile and his snout (as Peter called it) outlined upon the brown design of trees and birds. He was struck into silence. . . . Then, since Jack and Nita were arguing over refinement in comedians, of which she was a vigilant champion, and Gail was signalling to her husband with her wrist-watch extended, he lifted a corner of the window-curtain and peeped out. He was just in time to see Beryl step into Zharkov's pale blue and chromium car, and its owner in his fur-collared overcoat settle to the wheel. Peter noticed with distaste his wide, flat feet in their pearl-buttoned spats feeling for the levers before he slammed the door. The great car wheeled smoothly out of the parking-space and darted away towards Black-pool.

Peter let the curtain fall, and turned back into the room with a sickish feeling. Except for themselves, the restaurant was empty by now, and Peter's guests exchanged glances. "We ought really to be going," Gail said, "especially if we're counting on Jack's car to get

us home. It was a marvellous lunch, Peter, thank you!" Peter signalled to the waiter, who had the bill ready, and as he drew notes from his wallet, Gail remarked with a troubled look, "This is a large party, Peter. Do let Derek share!"

"Nonsense!" answered Peter with a half-wink. "What are expense sheets for?"

They came out from the restaurant on to a South Shore almost deserted in the dying season, with the idle joy-rides of Pleasure Beach rising like gaunt skeletons in the middle distance. The mists had crept back with the afternoon, dimming the sunrays and changing the sky to a slate-blue. Jack Kelham hung his overcoat on the railings and walked across to his car with the wary look of a pugilist advancing to shake hands at the beginning of an encounter. "Plenty of room for all!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"No, *thanks!*" replied Derek. "Hi, taxi!" and as one of the famous Rolls-Royce fleet of Blackpool drew up to the pavement, he turned and held out his hand to Peter. "So long, Warner!" he said. "Thanks for a charming lunch. Shall you be in front to-night?"

"Derek!" remonstrated Gail. "Perhaps we could drop Peter somewhere?"

"Actually," said Peter, "I'm going up to Whitegate Drive to call on old Wally Montrose——"

"Good God!" interjected Derek, "Is *he* alive still?"

"I'm assuming that. So perhaps *I* could take *you*, and drop you off where you want?"

"Right!" said Derek with alacrity. "Jump in, Gail!"

"Just a minute! I must say good-bye to Jack and Nita," said Peter, and walked over to where the two were crouched in debate over the mood of the car, like sorcerers watching their cauldron.

"I tell you, it's *not* the big-end!" Jack was saying.

"So long, Jack, so long, Nita!" said Peter. "If I don't see you again, old pals, before I leave Blackpool, look me up when you get back to Town."

"I suppose I'll have to jack the damn thing up," growled Jack, then glancing over his shoulder, "Right-o, old son!" he said with a vague look. "Don't make yourself a stranger!"

"Good-bye, Peter darling!" cried Nita without turning her head. "Thanks for a swell party . . . lovely grub . . . and all that! . . . Poke it with that thing, Jack!"

Peter realized that already he was beginning to fade back again into the indistinguishable world outside the theatre, and took his place beside Gail in the waiting taxi.

In front of them, as they drove back, arched the purplish sky with the Tower traced on it in dim pencil lines. The autumn hush was broken only by the whir of the motor, and the tinge of old gold in the air seemed the reflection from Gail's burnished head, as she stared

out of the window, faintly smiling, lost, it appeared, in her dream. To Peter there was a timelessness, a spell of silence during the drive that it would be sacrilege to break. Now and again the veriest ghost of a waltz-phrase, yearning and regretful, stirred the outer cells of his brain and vanished. Then the cab stopped at Church Street, where Derek had asked they should be dropped, and it was over.

Peter, after taking leave, and refusing Derek's offer of his share of the fare (which was not pressed), stood for a moment by the taxi door, watching the two ill-matched figures, the one short, round and heavy as a bullet, the other slender, and by contrast almost ethereal, move slowly side by side up the front. There seemed no mutual pleasure in their companionship. Then he jumped back into the taxi and gave the address, " 'The Orpheum,' Whitegate Drive! "

CHAPTER FOUR

I

As the taxi whizzed up the long artery of Church Street, past huddled theatreland and shopping-centre, past the more spacious intermediate stretch of churches, schools, and great garages, into the crimson heart of residential Blackpool, Peter was conscious still of the softening hand of autumn. It sprinkled the avenue with coppery leaves, set the Virginia creeper blushing, and toned the crude brickwork into harmony.

Not that the russet-robed nymph could effect much with "The Orpheum," that uncompromisingly scarlet villa in Whitegate Drive, not far past the whitewashed Regency Inn at the cross-roads that still retains its title of "The Number 3" House out of Blackpool. "The Orpheum" had the battlements of a mediæval castle, a campanile from Renaissance Italy, the conservatories of Kew, and, in a region where no householder is so humble as to be totally destitute of stained glass, its windows shone like the panes of a cathedral. No wonder that Peter felt a trifle abashed as he walked up the butter-coloured gravel and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a burly man with a waistcoat cut low enough to suggest a butler's frontage, and Peter was shown into a tall, dim drawing-room, so crowded with heavy furniture, so deeply shadowed by muslin and greengage plush curtains, that at first he peered about believing himself to be alone. Then a thin voice hailed him, and he groped his way forward to see in an arm-chair a very little, very wizened old man with a grey moustache and eyes like gleams of blue sky. "Coom in! Coom in, Mr Warner!" he piped. "I'm reet sorry I conna rise to welcome you! But it's a ghost you've kindly coom to visit—the ghost of old Wally Montrose!"

Peter, as he advanced, could now make out by the pink oblong of the electric fire, not only the bent figure of his host, but the end of a grand piano draped in a striped silk cloth with a silver statuette of a *ballerina* upon it; a giant cloisonné vase holding pampas grass in a corner, and the affectionately signed portraits of Lawrence Wright, Bert Feldman, and other kings of song publication standing out from the throng of framed photos on the mantel-piece and tables.

And this was Walter Montrose, song-writer, publisher, impresario, master of advertisement, who (not yet self-invested with that name) had migrated from the North to London at the age of fifteen to get a job in a classical music-publishing house. But to make songs, not to sell oratorios, was already the ambition of the wiry youth, with the dancing blue eyes; tunes came to his lips as he bounced about the shop

in shirt-sleeves and floppy tie, and escaped whistling from them in spite of rules and fines. He was only twenty when he took a farewell leap over the counter, and burst upon the world as an unquenchable fountain of popular melody, pure English of the pubs and beaches and buses. His songs never strayed into the exotic or the romantic; they kept to the homely spell of fun and good humour, of pretty faces and well-turned legs, of welcome pints in the glow of summer evenings. They were danced on piers and played in bar-parlours; they were hummed by the errand boy and the railway porter, rolled out on the pomp of military bands, plugged by the crooners of the radio. So they passed from seaside ball-rooms to palaces of variety, and thence by way of the "folk-medleys" of highbrow musicians to their niches among the classics. Would you give any lesser rank to "Bumpin' Billy on the Brixton Bus," or "Lily of Lambeth," or that Blackpool speciality, "On the dizzy Dipper, whoosh!"?

Once Wally Montrose had proved that he could write songs which people wanted to buy, he saw no sense in sharing the profits. Disregarding all offers from existing publishers, he founded the house of "Percy Peel, Ltd.," which was soon issuing his works in a continuous stream from an immense block filled with the latest printing machinery behind Oxford Street. In the golden days before gramophone records or radio, his own troupes of pierrots and entertainers carried his songs from Deal to Douglas, from Blackpool to Brighton, from Southend to Scarborough, scattering the copies (at 1s. 3d. a time) like snow-showers behind them. Never was such swift and far-sighted showmanship. The first aeroplane to fly sprinkled Dover cliffs with sheets of his "Mr Man in the Moon, Let Us Spoon!"; almost the first wireless message sent across English soil stammered his "Marconi Miss, Do You Miss Me?" Concert parties on the sands, revues in pier pavilions, carnival cavalcades, sky-writing planes, and loud-speakers sweeping the coastal esplanades of Britain like machine-gun fire, all joined in one melodious roar to the glory of Walter Montrose.

And Wally had lived—lived every minute of it, day and night—for nobody ever heard of his taking sleep. He had lived in the battle of business, in the riot of conviviality, in the incense of Havanas, the salvoes of champagne corks, the pursuit of beauty—full-hipped and frizzed. He had made the candle blaze at both ends and in the middle as well for so many moons that he could hardly say Fate had foreclosed on his mortgage if, after eighty years without a day of illness, she had now led him gently to a stick and a chair. Nor is there any reason to think he did; for though he complained shrilly to all who visited him of the affliction of old age, there was usually a twinkle in the faded but lively blue eyes that cast doubt on the reality of his quarrel with Time. . . . "Sit down there, Mr Warner!" he now continued, pointing with his stick. "What'll you take? Whisky? Beer? Tea?"

"Tea, thank you," answered Peter, noticing from the bronze clock supported by mandarins that it was close on four o'clock.

"Ee, you're a wise man!" cried Wally Montrose. "If I'd stuck to tea I'd have kept going to a hundred, I would and all!" He had pressed an unseen electric bell, and the man with the slight aspect of a butler returned. "Look, Nelson!" said Wally; "I call him Nelson," he explained to Peter, "because he used to run the pleasure boats by pier for me; look, Nelson, here's a man wi' sense enough to drink tea instead of whisky! . . . No wonder he can smile! . . . E-e-e! How he can smile! Look at him!" and as Peter blushed, "Get agate, Nelson, and bring tea!" Wally added.

"You'll understand, Mr Warner," he went on ruminatively as the man disappeared, "it's joost a plain coop o' tea I can offer you. We had no taim to make any preparations for you; so I hope you'll excuse us and be satisfied with joost a coop o' tea?"

"I came for the pleasure of meeting you, Mr Montrose," Peter assured him. "Please don't worry about tea or anything else."

"Nay, but I conna help worryin'. I've plenty to worry about. Look at me! I shouldn't be like this at eighty! Ah! Here's your tea, Mr Warner! Hurry oop, Nelson!"

The admiral of the pleasure-fleet was cautiously steering a large wheeled tray amid the reefs of the furniture. It was laden with a massive tea-pot of ribbed silver, a covered dish of hot tea-cakes, a plate of shrimp pasties, another of ham sandwiches (large), a third of cress sandwiches (small), a fourth of thin bread and butter, two sorts of jam, slices of plum cake in a filigree dish with a hooped handle, an iced cake, and a dish of small pastries. This cargo he at last landed beside his master's chair.

Walter Montrose lifted the lid off the tea-cakes with a grimace, picked a sandwich off a plate, opened it distastefully and threw it aside. "Yo' mun make the best yo' can of it, Mr Warner," he said with a dissatisfied sigh. "Pour out tea, Nelson, you numbyed! Tha' knows I conna handle this tea-pot nowadays. . . . What dost say, villain?" for Nelson had made a grinning remark aside to his master which called out an answering pucker all over the old man's face. "Didst hear that, Mr Warner?" he chuckled. "He says it was never tea-pots I was good at liftin'. What's to do wi' a servant that sauces you like that? . . . Take a month's notice, Nelson!"

"Time, too!" replied Nelson calmly. "I hadna had it this month, and I was afraid yo'd forgotten it."

"Pour out and howd your hush!" exclaimed Wally, feebly brandishing the soft cushion from behind his head at him. "Not too weak, now!"

"Not too strong, please, for me at any rate!" pleaded Peter, observing the mulberry colour of the decoction that was flowing from the silver spout into the Crown Derby cup.

"Have it as you laike, Mr Warner, joost as you laike! You're not havin' mooch anygates!"

"Oh, Mr Montrose! There's only one thing I regret!"

"Eh, what's that, then?"

"My lunch! . . . I so much prefer tea!"

Wally Montrose's face wrinkled with delight again; the worn blue eyes kindled anew. "So do I, lad, so do I! Coom, help thysen, and let's make belief it's t'owd times . . . t'good owd times. . . . Get out, Nelson! Happen that 'ull make it easier! . . . Ay, the grand owd times, and I've seen soom, Mr Warner!"

"Specially at Blackpool, eh?" Peter's eyes twinkled.

"Ay, at Blackpool . . . and at Douglas . . . and at New Brighton . . . and at Morecambe Bay and Llandudno . . . and London, too . . . and in Australia . . . all over t'world! Those were Wally Montrose's great days . . . before I became a ghost like! . . . I've stood out yonder, Mr Warner, on the green in front of the Gynn Inn, in the middle of a crowd o' thousands clamourin' . . . ay, clamourin' . . . for copies o' 'Boompin' Billy' that had joost been sung to 'em by John Harrison and Jessie Reed. . . . Remember Jessie Reed? . . . No? . . . before your time, eh? . . . Ee-e, what a luvley girl!" He sighed with tender reminiscence. "I gave her a cloak-room job at one o' my places when she got so fat and owd she was past t'other. . . . Ay, and then I remember Jubilee Year at Grandpool, the time I brought Pageant o' t'Seven Beauty Queens of British Empire along t'front . . . each in her own floral car . . . miracles of art, Mr Warner! Ay, and there were t'Yeomanry in brass helmets and red tunics ridin' at head o' procession, and mysel' joost behind in first motor-car ever seen in Grandpool, all smothered in flowers too!"

"Magnificent!" cried Peter.

"Ay, magnificent!" repeated the old man, his head nodding and shaking with delight. "An' there was telegram, too, in all papers an' displayed in facsimile on all t'walls o' Grandpool, from Queen hersel' invoking the blessing o' God upon our enterprise!"

"You never got that, Mr Montrose!"

"I did an' all, lad! You see, I wrote to Queen Victoria's Private Secretary, Lord . . . ee, now, I've forgotten name . . . forget everything these days . . . hoombly praying for Her Majesty's blessing on our labour for drawing together t'womanhood of t'British Empire in loyalty and purity. . . . I chose those words . . . 'loyalty and purity,' and sayin' five thousand pounds had already been subscribed . . . so it had been, by my backers . . . for t'Queen's Hospitals. We got it all back an' more out o' soovenir programmes, half a crown each, and copies o' Jubilee Ode set to music by Vivian Farr . . . that was me, too."

"And you got the letter from Her Majesty?"

"Ay, I got it aw' reet! There was a bit o' bother afterwards, as to

how I got it. . . . Some Nosey Parker was for askin' questions in Parliament. . . . But I stopped that . . . and anyhow, it was too late to do owt about it, wasn't it?"

"Looking at it that way, yes."

"Eh!" Walter Montrose sank back into the cushions of his chair. "Seems to me sun was warmer laike in those days . . . and t'bands! . . . There are *no* bands nowadays, Mr Warner, all squiggle and no blow. . . . But you're not eatin' owt!"

"Good heavens! After two days of Blackpool hospitality I can eat nothing for a week when I get to London! But, do you know, Mr Montrose, why I suspect the sun was gayer and the bands more tuneful in the times you speak of?"

"Nay, lad, yo' must tell me that!"

"It was because it was *your* tunes the bands were playing, and *your* songs that were making the air sparkle."

A flush came over the withered old face. "Ee now, that's nice o' you! Nelson!"—for he had pressed his invisible bell and his attendant had put his rubicund face round the door—"coom here, Nelson!" quavered Wally, "and listen to what this gentleman says about me. . . . Say it again, Mr Warner! . . . say it again!"

Peter complied, and Nelson grinned approvingly. "Ay, that's about size of it!" he assented. "I'm always tellin' Mr Walter that, but he winnat listen to *me*."

"I've nobbut you to listen to all day, you rascal!" declared Wally. "Who cooms to visit me now? Pour some more tea for Mr Warner. . . . Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a whisky, Mr Warner? . . . Well, pour him some more tea . . . and me too for once!"

"Not for you, Mr Walter! It's agen doctor's orders," said Nelson, and after re-filling Peter's cup withdrew, threatened by his employer's cushion.

II

As Peter drank his second cup of tea, Wally Montrose said, "They tell me you're composer too, Mr Warner. Monty Du Parc says you've made some grand songs. Knows everything, doesn't he, your friend Monty? A bobbydazzler, eh?"

Peter laughed. "I suppose he has to be pretty smart to hold down his job, Mr Montrose."

"Ay, but what is his job, Mr Warner? Canst tell me that?"

"Press Represent——"

"Nay, that's chicken-feed for our Monty. What else is he?"

"He's never told me."

"Nor no one else. That's joost the point," replied Wally, fingering his ragged grey moustache and staring into the fire. "Play me something, Mr Warner. . . . Play one o' your tunes, any one, on piano yonder! Dunnot be shy, lad!"

"I'm not," retorted Peter, walking with knees that shook over to the piano and removing his red signet-ring. "Only, I'm not quite sure which of them I'd better inflict upon you."

"E-e-e, you're shy! I never saw such a shy young man!" chuckled Wally. "I know just what you're feelin'. I felt joost like that the first time I asked owd Longhurst t'publisher to listen to a tune o' mine. Go to it, lad! I'm on your side, you know!"

Peter laughed, and his nervousness left him. "All right!" he said. "If you'll forgive the roughness of it, I'll try to give you an impression——"

"Ay, that's t'proper patter!"

"Don't put me off again now, please! I'll play you, as best I can, a new tune that came to me early this morning while I was walking on the sands——"

"Waitin' for a girl!"

"Not a bit of it!" lied Peter. "Anyhow . . . this was the fancy that came to me . . . no words yet." He struck a chord or two on the piano, which had a fine, full tone. "The tune could be improved," he said. "Perhaps you'll be kind enough to show me how?"

"Eh, then you don't think I'm dead yet?" asked the old man.

"Most certainly not!"

"Happen I shall be, though, 'fore you get crackin' with that tune o' yours!"

Peter turned to the keyboard and played "Ridin' on a Star!" straight through with a confidence that surprised himself. "That's it," he said, striking the last chord heavily for the pleasure of hearing the rich tones resound from the Bechstein, and waited with a thickening in his throat for the verdict.

"Play me another!" was all Wally answered.

"Another of mine?"

"Ay, of course!"

"Well, if you can really stand it, here's my *Valse Rêveuse*. It's been published, and had a little bit of a success." He played the first movement, began the second, and broke it off.

"That's the notion of it," he said awkwardly.

"Do you know what I think, lad?" asked Wally.

"Tell me, Mr Montrose!" Peter could feel his heart pounding.

"It seems to me you've something more ambitious in your head. Something operatic laike?"

Peter laughed. "Well, I don't aim at grand opera—yet. But light opera . . . I don't mean the muck of cheap musicals, but *opérette*, if you like the word."

"I don't! Cut out French!"

"I certainly didn't go to France for my models. Shall we say a ballad opera? In the old English style, you know."

"Nay, lad! You'll noan beat t'*Beggar's Opera*!"

"I'll have a shot at it!"

"Coom! that's better! I laike that! You're gettin' some spirit into you! Now, play me thy opera, lad!"

"Right-o! It's called *Orange Nell*—it's about Nell Gwynn. This is her prayer when she pleads with the King to found Chelsea Hospital for his old and disabled soldiers." He began to play softly. "There are several themes in it, you see—the river . . . memories of the battle-field . . . the waiting for Death and the reward of duty done . . . and a woman's gift of herself to the lover who shows he has a heart as well as a crown. This is it!"

When he had finished singing, there was perspiration on his forehead: he had been carried away. Turning round on the stool, he was disconcerted to see Wally Montrose shaking with laughter. He felt as if he had toppled off a tower. "That's how it strikes you?" he said. "Just comic?"

"Nay! I was nobbut thinkin' we'st have neighbours crowdin' into drive to listen . . . the row you made! But I laike you for puttin' heart into it! That's the road to wraite a song that'll be sung by everybody—young and old, rich and poor, happy and sad. . . . And so you've made a whole opera about Nell Gwynn, have you?"

"Practically."

"Scrap it, lad!"

"What, Mr Montrose?"

"I said scrap it. It means nowt to-day. I doan't mean yon tune you played me . . . that would go to other words. But who cares now about Nell Gwynn, or Lady Godiva, or Guy Fawkes, 'cept for processions or jokes? Make operas about our own taimes, Mr Warner! Not the girl who sold oranges at Drury Lane two hoondred, three hoondred years ago, but the girl who sells chocolates at Palladium to-day! Not the soldiers o' King Charles II, but the soldiers o' King George VI."

"But, Mr Montrose!" Peter let his fingers fall upon this note and that. "Aren't you being the least little bit narrow? Take the *Beggar's Opera* we were speaking of."

"Eh, and who wrote *Beggar's Opera*? A man o' that taimе, writin' about his own taimе! You can write pretty things about past; you won't make *furor*!"

"I'm not so sure that I want to!" laughed Peter.

"Doan't you, Mr Warner? I think you do. I know I did. And I made *furor*, too! But, never mind! You have your ideas, I have mine. . . . Now I'll tell you something about those tunes of yours—they're champion!"

"Champion! . . . Oh, you're laughing at me, Mr Montrose!"

"Not now, I'm not. You listen to me! You go back to London and wraite out that gallopin' song o' yours with the words, and take it to our office, Percy Peel, in Newman Street. I'll send them word about

it, too. They'll take your song, Mr Warner, and even"—a kind of pleading seriousness came into his voice—"even if they doan't offer you all you're expectin' for it, think what a big chance it is for you, a young man like you, to be pooblished by us—"

"And think of your heavy expenses . . . and what you pay out in plug money and advertising for your composers . . . and the hundred piers you control where my songs will be sung all the summer through! . . . Isn't *that* t'proper patter?" asked Peter mischievously.

"Nay now, what's all this?" The old man's face broke up again into its grin of a hundred crinkles. "I see you know too mooch! . . . Well, then, my partners will give you joost what you are clever enough to make 'em give you. . . . But it'll be a square deal, lad, all the same."

"I don't doubt that, Mr Montrose. And in any case, I can look after myself."

"I'm noan so sure o' that. I was watchin' your face while you were playin' . . . an' I woonder. You may be a smart lad *here*"—he tapped his forehead with a shrivelled finger—"but hasta got t'will, lad, to fight for what is thine? I doubt it."

"You doubt it, do you?"

"Ay, very mooch. You doan't think of Number One, first, last, and all the taimie . . . and without that, eh, it's hard to make *furor*."

"Yet you think my work might?"

"Happen! It's got charm . . . personality . . . kindness. That's what pooblic laps oop—kindliness! There's kindness in the heart of every man and woman, 'cept a very few. Happen they only hide it, too! Now you and I, lad, speak to that kindness in them. So they love our songs, yours and mine!"

"Yours and mine," repeated Peter huskily. "Fancy speaking of them in the same breath!"

"I did. Ay, and I know it's a big, a very big compliment I'm payin' you. But some day, happen, your songs will be sung all over England and Continent. . . . Mind they don't rob you of your copy-rights over there! . . . and though I'll not hear it—I'll be in t'ooother cemetery by then and noan too sorry—they'll make *furor*. . . . And you won't get a penny out of it . . . bein' you!"

"Cheerful prophet, aren't you, Mr Montrose?"

"I doan't think you will, judgin' by your face." He bent forward in his chair, peering through the gathering twilight; then sank back with a sigh. "I conna read your expressions any more," he murmured. "It's gettin' too dark in here."

"Would you like me to switch the light on, Mr Montrose?"

"Nay, let be. We'll stay in t'shadows awhile. . . . Eh, that were champion tune, too, 'In the Shadows,' by Hermann Finck! I can be anywhere, any age I like to dream mysel' in the shadows. When lights go oop, then I remember where I am and what I am. Joost a ghost! I conna tell mysel' any more stories then."

He fell into a deep silence, his head nodding forward awhile, and then ceasing to stir. Peter rose softly. "I think it's time I was getting along, Mr Montrose," he said. "Thanks ever so for your marvellous 'cup of tea' . . . and for the rest, though no thanks could be adequate for *that*!"

"Nice o' you! Nice o' you!" mumbled the old man drowsily. "But you're a nice young man—with a smile. Coom again, if you care to! And," he suddenly lifted his head, "don't forget to take that song to my people in London! Doan't ask too much when you get there! We can't give you the earth, you know."

"I shall want it, though!" answered Peter mockingly. "And Heaven, too!"

"Reckon we all have that when tune goes raight, eh, lad?"

The blue eyes had flashed into light once more, the wrinkled face was all one smile. Peter took his leave without too much feeling of sadness.

III

When Peter came out into Whitegate Drive it was just past six. It was too late now to get hold of Beryl and take her anywhere before her show—indeed, he had forgotten to ask her where she was lodging. Peter decided to return to his hotel for a wash, and from there to telephone Beryl at the theatre as soon as she got in. He would try to persuade her to come out to supper. This would make it too late for him to slip into the first house of *Vanities of Vienna* and hear Gail sing again. But he might visit the Emporium at the second house before going to meet Beryl. He sprang on a tram-car that bore him rocking towards the front.

As he went he reflected on Wally Montrose's advice. Would he really be taking the wrong turning if he went on with his Nell Gwynn play? Was the historical opera, the "costume piece," an idle exercise, mere "escapism" to use the jargon of the day? He could not bring himself to believe it. The general voice (and the box office) refuted the idea. He thought of *The Yeomen of the Guard* and half a dozen more recent instances; people found refreshment in change of scene and time. No; Peter did not mean to be laughed out of *Orange Nell*.

But there was wisdom, too, in the old man's words. Narrow he might be, but he spoke out of his heart when he asked for music drawn from the world of the day. Peter, too, though he loved, in reading, writing, and composing, to wander through the rich galleries of the past, had never fallen into the fallacy that romance was the property of any one age. It sprang up wherever men and women lived and loved. All fashions evolved by human fancy were picturesque; every city (Peter fervidly agreed with Whistler) had its hours when it was "clothed in poetry"; all periods had their own beauty and

openings for adventure. Old Wally was right. Why not a musical—revue or *operette*—dedicated entirely to the passing moment, to the mood of modernity? Peter gazed unseeing at the thickening mass of people that crowded the tram on their way to the illuminations. It was a big idea Wally had given him! Why flee to history or saga, to Camelot or Lyonesse, for princesses, when there was . . . Gail Darien in Blackpool?

When Peter got on to Beryl at the theatre at about seven, he found her in one of her difficult moods. No; she couldn't go to supper with him after the show, because it was the conductor Leslie Linacre's birthday, and there was going to be a celebration in the theatre from which she couldn't stay away. No; she couldn't lunch with him to-morrow, because she had a date . . . Who with? . . . That was surely her business? At last she agreed to meet Peter for morning coffee at the Savoy, since, he pleaded, that would be his only chance of seeing her before going back to London in the afternoon.

Peter hooked up the receiver with an unhappy feeling. He realized that things were going wrong between Beryl and himself, and asked himself if it were his fault. What really was a brother's duty in a case like hers? He supposed she had a right to manage her own life—in any case, she was older than he was. What privilege had he, then, to rebuke her like a father or a Dutch uncle? He had no claim to set up as a moralist. . . . Yet, Zharkov! That stuck in his gizzard. Had his sister no pride in herself, then?

It was odd that anyone so sensitive in art as Beryl should have so little discrimination in men. For she was a sensitive musician. Once that side of her was stirred she forgot herself, her waywardness, her entangled desires and incomprehensible discontents. Her face would lighten and its contours refine themselves as, waving a cigarette in her beautiful sinewy fingers, she caught up ideas, played ball with them, dropped them with a sour but infinitely expressive grimace, or approved them with the rare, flashing smile that made her (that at any rate was what Peter used to think) the loveliest girl in the world. How he wanted at this moment to discuss Wally Montrose's personality and doctrines with Beryl, and get her reaction to this idea of a musical that should be modern in every bar of its score, every word of its text!

Well; he must hope to find her in a less prickly temper to-morrow. Meanwhile, there was a gap of nearly two hours to fill before Gail would be coming on at the Emporium. What should he do? he asked himself, and the answer was simple. At Blackpool, in season or out of season, sun, rain, or blow, there is always one grand resource—the Tower. In that palace of inexhaustible marvels, opening one from the other like a Chinese conjurer's nest of magic boxes, the youthfully-minded from eight to eighty can find entertainment that lets whole days slip by unnoticed. The price of entry—the "Open Sesame!"—to

the whole world of wonders sheltered by the soaring monument was, at the date of this chapter, just ninepence, and within a few minutes Peter, mounting the steps worn hollow by the feet of happy millions, had paid this sum at the doors and gone in.

In the red-brick entrance-hall with its blue majolica plaques, suggestive somehow of the booking-hall of a great railway station, he hesitated for a moment. Then, swinging to the right with his energetic "star-fish" action of legs and arms, he ran up a stone staircase echoing bleakly to the footfalls of multitudinous pleasure-seekers.

On the first story glass doors led into a long apartment that, with its dust-coloured dimness, its cases of stuffed birds, and its row of benches running down the middle, had the air of a Victorian schoolroom. It was only the pictures ornamenting the walls that were different; for they were live lions, bears, pumas, and hyænas, surveying with weary contempt the river of sightseers that congealed for a minute or two before their bars, with cries from the children and laughter from the grown-ups, before drifting on again. Peter could never lose his amusement at this Zoo in an upstairs classroom—its unexpectedness was of the essence of Blackpool. For a while he watched the monkeys darting round their arched wire cage, the design of which seemed to date from the 1851 Exhibition, and admired the sheen of the parrots perched high above. Then his eyes fell to the slot-machines round the walls.

Before the Story of the Sleeping Beauty an unattractive little shop-girl was gazing enviously at the jerky kiss given by the Prince to the heroine on her gilt couch; while squeals mingled with merriment came from a family enjoying the tremors of the Haunted Churchyard and its scarlet demons. There were two boys in school caps, a small girl in a plum-coloured coat, Father in a checked cap and muffler, and Mother, black-fringed, spectacled, and insecurely bulging from her best, high-heeled shoes. She was wrestling with the catch of her capacious hand-bag, to find more coppers with which to satisfy her offsprings' thirst for the terrifying. They jumped about her, clamouring and pawing at the bag, while she admonished them with ejaculations of, "Give over, now, A-a-albert!" and "Will you be-y-a-ave, Ivy?" At last a resounding clout fell on the ear of the girl, who had actually pulled the clasp of the bag open, to the peril of its contents. "Y'asked for that one, lass!" commented the father as she raised a wail, and "I've no patience!" declared the mother. "Nearly broke fastening, she has! Howd your hush, Ivy, and enjoy yoursel', or happen you'll get another that'll hurt you!"

Seizing the sniffing child by the wrist, she dragged her away towards the doors at the far end, the two boys following with half-fearful, half-delighted glances at one another, and the father bringing up the rear with a rolling walk and his pipe jutting between his teeth. To judge from the glances he cast from side to side as he went, he seemed to be pricing lions, bears, slot-machines, and benches alike,

with a determination not to be overcharged, even in admiration, for any of them.

Peter chuckled, and felt in his pockets for pence with which to renew his own childish acquaintance with the Ghost Ship and the Supper with Death. As he did so a shining object on the floor caught his eye just where the Lancashire family had been standing. He stooped to pick it up, and found it was a chain purse containing a good deal of silver and a couple of pound notes. So Mother *had* lost something out of her bag! Hastily Peter crammed the purse into his jacket pocket and ran towards the swing-doors at the farther end of the Zoo, in the direction of which he had seen the family moving. As he passed through the doors, he caught a glimpse of them turning the corner of the staircase to the second floor—there was Father's checked cap and the little girl's plum-coloured coat. Peter ran up the stairs after them, but when he reached the next landing he found that he had been deceived by common articles of dress, and that this was a different family altogether. He let them disappear and looked about him.

He was alone in a gloomy forest of palms beneath a black glass roof, and a little cough he gave woke eerie echoes. He was wondering which way to take when a tap fell on his shoulder. He turned round and found a tall, severe-looking man regarding him. "Just a minute!" said this stranger.

"What do you want?" demanded Peter.

A cold eye studied him from under the brim of a black hat. "I must ask you to come with me and interview the Inspector," was the answer.

"Interview the Inspector? What the devil for?" snapped Peter.

"I have reason to believe you are in possession of property that does not belong to you."

Peter blushed and clapped his hand to his jacket pocket, snatched it away, and then, laughing awkwardly, drew out the chain purse. He could not have shown livelier signs of guilt. "Do you mean this?" he faltered.

"I *do* mean that," said the other, taking the purse from him and opening it. "This contains silver and two £1 notes," he observed sternly.

"Well, I can explain that quite easily——"

"Better explain to the Inspector, sir! Come along!"

"But there's no need. The whole thing's absurdly simple. I picked this up on the floor in the Zoo, and I was looking for the woman who I was sure had dropped it."

"Why did you conceal it about your person?"

"I really don't know."

"Why didn't you give it immediately to one of the Tower attendants?"

"I—I—yes, I suppose that would have been more sensible. You see, I thought I'd be able to find the owner in a minute, and so—so—"

"Not a very likely tale, is it?"

"Do you think I'm lying to you? If you'd only let me find the owner instead of standing here talking nonsense—she can't be far off—she'll tell you if it's true or not!"

Peter made a move, and found himself detained by an expert twist on his sleeve. "Look!" said his interrogator, "I asked you to come with me to the Inspector. Are you coming quietly, or must I blow my whistle for assistance?"

"Good Lord, no!" cried Peter. "I don't want a silly scene! Take me to your Inspector! I hope he'll have more sense than you!"

"This way, then! Step lively, please!" and Peter felt himself piloted by the arm through the glades of the sad forest to a short stairway leading upwards. It opened at the top into a gorgeous Oriental Court, from the centre of which sprang a pagoda containing a brightly illuminated lift, with the attendant lounging beside it. On either side stalls of souvenir jewellery made a tempting show. But Peter had little time to take his bearings, for he was marched up yet another flight of stairs, along a corridor tactlessly exhibiting a row of slot-machines devoted to executions and judicial tortures, on to a gallery level with the first story of the pagoda, which seemed to ascend through the roof of the building. Beneath the *décor* of Chinese masks and dragons could be discerned the arches and supports of the Tower itself, into the iron legs of which the whole structure had been fitted. Peter's conductor pushed open a latticed door with a curved Oriental pent-house over it, and glanced along a passage lined with filing-cupboards, along which at that moment a girl clerk was carrying a typewriter. "Inspector Wallace?" he called, and she stopped and shook her head. "Not *here!*" she answered.

Peter's captor turned to him and said, "He'll be outside on the top, then. This way!"

"Look *here!*" protested Peter as he was dragged by the arm towards the lift inside the pagoda, "you can't do this to me! I've a filthy head for heights, and I won't—"

The man in the black hat stopped and thrust it on to the back of his head with one of those tough expressions which Peter had often seen and shuddered at on the faces of the cops in gangster pictures. "Asking for trouble—eh?" he snarled. . . . "And I always thought," said Peter to himself, as he walked meekly into the lift, "that the English police had a world reputation for courtesy!" The next moment the doors slid to with sinister smoothness, and the lift seemed to shoot blindly up into the sky.

Peter groped for something to hold on by. The lift had windows, and through them the shadowy skeleton of the Tower could be seen

rushing downwards with appalling rapidity, to plunge into the net of gay lights spread far, ever so far, below. Peter could not rid himself of the insane notion that at the pace they were going they must crash through the crown of the Tower, and the lift and its occupants be discharged into space. Yet when they did stop with a jerk that made him stagger, he was not at all grateful, so jumbled was his inside.

The doors slid back, and, prodded from behind, he stepped gingerly out into the enclosed gallery at the summit. The autumn night was chilly up here, and the wind moaned, seeming to sway the Tower to and fro. There was nobody to be seen, and the little shops were already closed. While his custodian was walking from corner to corner peering about for the Inspector, Peter, with pins and needles creeping up his legs, ventured to the windows and looked out. Below blazed the illuminations like jewels spread on a gigantic tray of black velvet—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds strung out in chains and necklaces, in crescent brooches and sparkling rings. The suburbs of Blackpool were drawn in lines of plain gold beyond, and the restless sea threw up its festoons of white lace under a misty paring of moon.

For a moment Peter gasped at the beauty of the spectacle; then the grey moth's wing of the searchlight on the platform overhead swept past his eyes with dizzying effect. The Tower seemed to be inclining like that of Pisa, to be toppling straight forward into the sea. Peter shrank back and sought the lift with tottering steps; his escort was ready with a supporting grip. "Missed the Inspector again!" he said, and to the attendant, "All right—we'll go down."

The lift fell like a stone; it was really worse than the ascent. Wally's tea came up in vivid reminiscence, and Peter blinked with amazement at the indifference of his two companions. They had evidently stronger heads and stomachs!

He emerged from the pagoda too thankful to argue, and suffered himself to be led out of the Eastern temple along the back of a lofty gallery which was proved, by the glitter of giant chandeliers beyond and the strains of dance music floating up from below, to be part of the Tower Ball-room. The music died abruptly as the dismal forest like a nightmare enveloped them again. After that they went down and down stairs until Peter rebelliously began to whistle the "Police-man's Serenade" under his breath. But a smart tap on his shoulder warned him to desist, and they continued to descend in silence towards the bowels of the earth, until they emerged at last into a warm, damp gloom, in which, framed by artificial rocks, fish pouted at them through green water effervescing with silver bubbles. But Peter was given no chance to rest his throbbing feet in the Aquarium, and admire the scarlet anemones, the blue and purple bass, the pink shrimps, the minute red sparks of the flame-fish, the golden mail of the carp. Instead he was hustled through it and out by an exit that led, surprisingly, into the entrance-hall of the Tower.

Here Peter's saturnine companion went up to one of the attendants on the door and spoke to him. Returning with a nod, he gave the order, "Get up those stairs!" "This is where I came in!" protested his prisoner, toiling painfully up the stone staircase by which he had entered upon his evening's adventures. He passed by what he was now almost willing to call the "scene of his crime," through the Zoo again, where the animals were yawning and beginning to get ready for sleep, and then, on a command from behind, turned aside into the Long Bar, bright with lights and loud with talk. His captor led him straight up to a tall, heavily built man who was standing with his back to them at the bar, holding a glass of beer to his lips. "Here he is, sir!" he said, and stood to attention.

IV

The broad-backed man emptied his glass and set it down, wiped his lips, and turned slowly round. From a crimson face crowned by silvery hair, two steel-grey eyes regarded Peter through convex glasses, while, below, a thin mouth curved in a sardonic smile.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Peter. "*Mr Forshaw!*"

"Raigh—it's me!" answered the Chairman of Fizz, pushing the thick lenses back on a nose not unlike the side view of a lobster's claw.

"But—but—I thought you were in America!"

"Seems, lad, you may have thought wrong, laike! . . . So did some others . . . notably, Miss Lillian Green. . . . Eh, Joe?" and Forshaw winked at Peter's conductor, who was still standing just behind him. Peter wheeled round to take another look at the "detective," and found—a different man. A huge grin split his face, the mouth that had looked so inexorable quivered like india-rubber with amusement; the sombre hat, pushed to the side of his head, was positively rakish.

"I know you!" cried Peter, striking his forehead. "I've seen you in the pier revues often. . . . Joe Tucker, aren't you? . . . Lord! to think I was taken in by *you!*"

The comedian laughed. "After all, old boy," he said, "*I am* an actor!"

"Ay," said Forshaw, "that's his most woonderful impersonation. An actor! He took me in, so that I paid him salary for three seasons before I found out."

"Come, come, Bob! Don't do me dirt!" remonstrated Joe.

"The last thing I'd dream of. You're always clean, Joe, if not invariably entertaining."

"I didn't find him entertaining!" declared Peter, his resentment returning. "What was the big idea, Mr Forshaw? Why did you lead me this infernal dance?"

Bob Forshaw rubbed the tip of his nose where it curved sinister. "You ask me a question," he said. "I'll ask you a question. . . . What'll you take?"

"A pint," replied Peter, "and I'll say I've earned it. I think I've worn holes in my shoes." He lifted a foot and caressed it tenderly. His pint was brought, and as he plunged his nose into the glass he reflected on Forshaw's notorious passion for practical jokes. The great showman, who had never troubled to disguise his provincial origin or his rude education; who had begun life as one of the several sons of a small and unsuccessful North Country manager, and started for himself as a boy in a ball-throwing booth at Blackpool; who had painted scenery, installed electricity, written sketches, songs, and pantomimes; who had climbed by way of cheap touring revues to the top seat of London management; Bob Forshaw, artist and business man, cynic and sentimentalist, generous or skinflint according to his mood, "slave-driver" or "good trouser" in varying report, was a pure projection of the theatre. If all the world was a stage for him, the stage to him was all the world. He had never felt the need for wife or children, and the activities of that part of humanity that dwelt beyond the footlights seemed to him so fantastic and unreal that he could but fling gigantic hoaxes into their busy futilities. You could not dislike him whatever he did; glamour walked with him, he was carnival incarnate; and there was at times an incandescent glow at the back of the pale, steely eyes that revealed the torch of genius.

Yes, but there were some things! . . . and Peter querulously returned to his grievance. Why . . .

Forshaw cut him short. "I'll tell you. Why do you coom snoopin' round my shows? . . . The newspapers, eh? . . . Well, you know I forbid 'em at my try-outs! Cuttin' up joint before 'tis properly cooked!"

"I didn't cut up *I Like You, Lady!*" retorted Peter, hot in defence of his trade. "I just gave London an appetizing aperitive."

"Interpret the Yiddish, Joe, wilta?"

"A jolly good boost, then, if you prefer it. That's what I gave you and your show."

"Ay, and a mucky good thing for thee thou didst. Else I'd have sent thee to top of Tower by outside stair!"

"Oh, well," said Peter, realizing the uselessness of a quarrel, "you spared me something, at any rate."

Forshaw grinned. "It was a good gag . . . all on spur of moment! Joe and I saw thee pick up t'purse, and I sent him chasin' after thee, quick as he could go. . . . Ee! I could hear t'beer splashing about inside him as he ran! . . . Well, drink up, lad! What can I do for thee, to be forgiven?" It was not Mr Forshaw's policy to carry any quarrel with a journalist too far.

In a flash Peter seemed to see his chance. "There is something you

could do, Mr Forshaw," he answered. "Would you give a singing audition . . . a special one . . . *yourself* . . . to a friend of mine?"

Bob Forshaw's face drooped like a faded red cabbage. "E-e-e, Joe, dost hear that? He wants me . . . *me* . . . to hear his bit o' stooff sing!"

"It's not my 'bit of stuff,' " shouted Peter, furious. "And if you refuse to hear her, you're going to miss a big chance!"

"Ah! I miss so many of them, every day," returned Forshaw. "No wonder I'm near coomin' to workhouse in t'end, I am that careless!"

"It wouldn't take you more than a quarter of an hour!" coaxed Peter.

"Have another drink and forget it, lad!"

"Have one with me, this time! . . . Can't you really manage it, Mr Forshaw?"

"See Monty Du Parc about it!"

"I have. But if *you*——"

"Nay, I'll brain thee with this if tha' canstna leave me drink in peace!" Forshaw raised his empty glass threateningly.

"Another pint, Miss!" said Peter, taking it from him. "Look here, can I speak to you about it in London?"

"Nay, I'm not goin' back to London. I'm off to Spitzbergen."

"When you come back from there, then?"

"Ay, when I coom back! Ring me up any time between twelve p.m. and midnight, wilta?"

Peter saw it was useless to persist. "One day," he said, "you'll be glad to pay Gail Darien anything she likes to ask."

"Happen!" replied Forshaw, and upon that they drank a last glass together very pleasantly. Peter, then, realizing that it was too late to go to the Emporium, announced that he would look in at the Ball-room.

"Tha'd best leave that purse wi' Lost Property first!" Forshaw called after him. "Else I'll set real house dick on to thee, I will an' all!"

Peter took this advice, and afterwards, on his way to the Ball-room, considered the elusiveness of magnates. They always fobbed you off on to some underling. "See Monty Du Parc!"—it was the old story. But at any rate, Peter thought, it showed that his friend enjoyed the mighty Chairman's confidence. It had clearly been the right thing to seek to interest Monty in Gail Darien. . . .

Suddenly the glimmer of a journalistic conscience returned to Peter. What was that slighting thing Forshaw had said about Lillian Green, the soprano in his new show? Did it mean that there was bad blood between him and the singer? If so, there might be a story in it. He resolved to try to extract the "dirt" from Beryl in the morning before returning to Town, and upon that he entered the Ball-room.

V

After the Chinese fantasy of the central building, the dance hall sought to dwarf the baroque palaces of Europe. Colossal, dream-like, it rose tier by tier in a riot of cream and gold curves to the dazzling chandeliers and the luscious frescoes of the ceiling. On the stage at one end, round the console of the great organ, the musicians were grouped within a proscenium rich with volutes and statuary; while round the roof ran a panelled roll of the great composers, over which white Allegories fluttered their sculptured pinions.

Even when, as to-night, he had brought no partner, and did not care to invite one from the crowd of girls waiting at the end of the room opposite the stage—the “paddock” he irreverently called it—Peter found an endless fascination in the Ball-room. He loved the opening of the session, the empty floor shining like a dark lake, with only a few children at play on its exciting expanse, the band humming its invitation, and then, here and there stray couples beginning to glide and turn . . . usually with professional finish, for the indifferent dancers did not risk the notice of opening the ball. Then, even as the eye sought to follow this pretty face, those graceful ankles, the couples multiplied; they swirled into action like a shower of many-coloured flakes; and in a few minutes the whole floor seemed to be slowly revolving. It was a rhythmic enchantment, wave upon wave, bubbles and whirlpools of motion that formed and dissolved into the regular swing and turn at the corners, while the saxophones droned and the cymbals clashed hypnotically. Girls danced with boys, women with old men very gallant in bearing, girls again with girls, for the male supply was always short, mothers in the earlier hours with their children, prancing ecstatically along. Then abruptly the music would break off; the waves wash against the edges of the basin, as the couples cleared the floor; and only one small child, perhaps, in a bright coat, be left rolling unself-consciously in the void.

But there were no children left at this hour, a special late evening with prizes. Before Peter, as he watched between two pilasters at the side, passed fair heads, brown heads, dark heads, set in sculpturesque waves, smoothed in sleek bobs, tempestuous with short curls. He watched the swinging skirts, the shimmering silken legs, the tapering heels. He watched the elegance of masculine youth, svelte of waistline and with carefully matched tie and handkerchief, here ardently protective, there facetiously frolicsome, there again conscious of its skill and the compliment it bestowed upon its partner. A proportion of evening gowns and black jackets marked the gala occasion. If there were several silly faces, one or two vicious faces, and a fair allowance of wrinkles, it was on the whole a sea of prepossessing youth that went by, rippling with gaiety, content with the eternal joy of boys and girls in one another, gallantly facing the enigmatic future. Tears

sprang suddenly into Peter's eyes, he could not tell why. Then, as the band stopped amid a burst of clapping while the Master of Ceremonies cried, "Clear the floor, please!" and his men scattered chalk upon it, Peter saw through the dissolving crowd Gail Darien, bare-headed in a dark dress, on the opposite edge of the floor.

Peter started across the middle to reach her, but was turned back by the M.C., and compelled to make his way round by the "paddock" through a press of rouged faces, perfumed curls, oiled male hair, and flashes of cheap jewellery, all softened by the blue veil of cigarette smoke. He was afraid that Gail might disappear before he came up with her, but she was still there when he reached the spot; and behind her were Jack Kelham and Nita, as well as a squat figure with red hair and a mouth painted like a claret-coloured gash, Miss Bobo Baggaley.

"What are you doing here, Doctor?" Jack hailed him. "*Honi soit qui palais de danse*—eh?"

Gail greeted Peter smilingly. "We got through a quarter of an hour early to-night," she told him. "You never saw such a hard audience!"

"If tha' canst play Blackpool, lass, tha' canst play any place!" interjected Jack.

"And so," continued Gail, "we came on here for half an hour. Derek's in the bar."

"So's Vincent," added Jack, "seeing a dog about a man."

"Jack!" protested Nita.

"S a fact," insisted Jack. "It's an unusually intelligent dog. It's taught the man to play chess with it and fixes all the contracts for the act itself."

"Please introduce me!" said Bobo reproachfully, turning from back-chat over her shoulder with two young men, lavishly ringed and scented; and when it was done, "You're a journalist, aren't you?" she demanded. "I s'pose you know——"

"Atheistan Rigglesworth? Only too well, Miss Baggaley," Peter answered.

"Ah! It's all very well for yew great men to talk!" said Bobo archly. "Dancin', Mr Warner?"

"With me!" put in Gail, turning round. "Sorry, Bobo! We fixed it five minutes ago."

"Granted, darling!" said Bobo with a giggle. "Don't tire yourself though, dear! You do look properly washed up," and she turned away in search of the two florid cavaliers she had rashly let slip.

"That was sweet of you!" murmured Peter as he walked on to the floor with Gail.

"I can't endure that . . . er . . . word missing! . . ." replied Gail between her teeth. "And you looked as if you wanted rescuing. Hope you didn't think I was thrusting?"

"Well, I should never have *asked* you, of course!" grinned Peter, and took her hand.

Gail fitted herself to the music for a second or two with her head thrown back and her eyes half-closed. Then, raising her large lids for a moment to emit a topaz gleam, "Maybe you won't ask me twice!" she said. "You may find me . . . out of step!"

"You may find me . . . awkward," he answered. "I'm apt to rush it rather. You must teach me how you want it to be!"

They fell silent, surrendering themselves to the dance. On the band platform a girl vocalist began to sing "The Way you Look To-night!" through the microphone. Gail quickly discovered that Peter, for all his gawkiness off the floor, was a very good dancer; he had musical sense, and he was sensitive to his partner. For his part his difficulty was that she scarcely seemed to be there. He might be holding no one, so light and aloof she was. It took him some minutes to acquire the feeling of her, and adapt himself to her barely perceptible steps. The fancy struck him that if they were dancing on sand she would leave no prints. Then, all in an instant, he seemed to fall into the right rhythm, and to be floating alone with her in an intoxicating dream.

Glances of light showed in the intervals between the dancing couples; the brightly illuminated stage threw their shadows, gigantic, on the nearest stretch of floor; above the swish and slither of feet Jerome Kern's plaintive serenade came sighing over the microphone. . . . Then, of a sudden, the band stopped amid clapping, and rushed heartlessly into the "King."

"We must find the others," said Gail, as they walked off the floor, while the lights began already to disappear, section by section. "Then, shut-eye for this l'il girl! It's been nice meeting you, Peter. You're encouraging."

"You need encouragement, then?"

"What! After three years of touring revue and professional digs? If you knew . . ." She sighed. "I'm not what I was when I went to Bem Middlemast. I thought then the r-r-ruddy globe was at my feet to kick. But since . . . it hasn't been Gail Darien who's done the kicking; no, Mister!"

"Well, the better days are coming now," Peter assured her fervently.

"So's Derek!" said Gail, looking calmly across the floor.

Outside, the front looked empty, vast and dark, for the illuminations had been switched off. The traffic beacons upheld their orange globes against the blue night. Peter, as he emerged, stood listening to the solemn sound of the sea below the wall. This was Blackpool? . . . Or Paradise? . . . Or Klingsor's dangerous garden?

CHAPTER FIVE

I

WHEN Peter returned to London on the afternoon of the following day he had not learnt anything more from Beryl about her relations with Zharkov—on that subject her lips had remained sulkily closed—but he had discovered something about the trouble between the singer Lillian Green and Bob Forshaw. All the Fizz executives, it seemed, had believed that the Chairman was on his way to America when he was really standing at the back of the gallery at the Palatine Gardens Theatre watching the first performance of *I Like You, Lady!* He had been known to lay such traps before; he said he liked to observe how his interests were looked after by those he paid to do it when he was supposed to be away; but somehow nobody (unless it were Monty Du Parc) had dreamed that his much-publicized trip to New York was a blind of this nature.

He burst therefore with all the more devastating effect upon his collaborators and subordinates at the fall of the curtain on the Monday night. Although the show had had an excellent reception, with all the calls and flowers that could be expected, he had a long list of criticisms to make, and he hurled them forthwith at the head of his partner, Arthur Inman, the producer.

Between these two, though they were still "correct" in their public behaviour to one another, there had been for some time a latent tension. Jealousy may have had something to do with it. Forshaw, who in his time had produced revues and musicals with huge success in Blackpool, Manchester, London, Paris, and New York, couldn't see why the public were so crazy about Inman's new staging and lighting. (There couldn't be anything really new in the theatre: Forshaw, he always averred, had taught C. B. Cochran and George Black all they knew, and he had been up to every trick before Inman wore long trousers.) At the same time he was enough of a business man to realize that Inman, being the mode of the moment, spelt prosperity at the box office, and therefore for five years now Inman had been Fizz's director-producer. But Forshaw sniffed whenever he came out from the dress rehearsal of one of Arthur Inman's triumphs.

There was also a temperamental cleavage which it was difficult to bridge. Bob Forshaw took the footlights with him wherever he went; Inman's grim looks failed to suggest the theatre at all. A bank manager or an accountant you might have taken him for in his black City coat and pin-stripe trousers. A silent man without anecdote or humour, never swearing or making lewd allusions, he indulged in no rages at rehearsals, but kept his actors in terror by withering sarcasm.

He did not drink in bars; he did not smoke in theatres; he sat in no clubs, and was a rare enough visitor at restaurants to be pointed out when he did make an appearance. He preferred to pass his free evenings, scrupulously arrayed in evening dress, with his family in his splendid, if slightly sombre, house in Cavendish Square. There he enjoyed his glass of chosen vintage; there he smoked cigars such as you would not obtain in either restaurants or clubs.

"I don't know how that chap lives!" Forshaw would declare in his favourite Bohemian circles. "He doesn't get any foon at all, no, nor he doesn't seem to want it! Eh, it must be dull, the way he lives!" But that was where the ebullient Bob was wrong. Arthur Inman profoundly enjoyed his "dull" life. Like Forshaw he had passed through early days of struggle. The son of a stage electrician, he had learnt his father's craft, and won his way up from shirt-sleeves, overalls, and saying "Sir" to Assistant Stage-Managers. He had not enjoyed it as Bob had enjoyed the early shifts and chances of his career; he had simply vowed to fight his way out of it, and done so. Respectability was his romance; Bohemianism, shifts to make ends meet, hail-fellow-well-met encounters ending in drinks and loans were his notion of hell. He had rather watch his plain daughter playing hockey at Roedean than be seen parading the most expensive glamour-girl at West End supper tables; he found more excitement in awaiting the results of his son's examinations at Cambridge than in watching the tape machine for a winner at Newmarket.

It was Inman's habit to absent himself during the first nights of the shows he produced—he said it was better for the actors, but it may have been his own rigidly repressed nerves he was thinking of. He usually appeared at the final curtain-fall to see what the luck had been, and thus it was that, in the full relief of feeling that he had scored another success with *I Like You, Lady!*, he was fallen upon by Forshaw with a string of complaints, the most bitter directed against that soprano of tested box-office appeal, Lillian Green.

First, said Mr Forshaw, and truly, she had been late for her principal scene, and had kept the tabs down so long that the band had been compelled to play Mr Zharkov's "new" waltz refrain over and over until the audience began to recollect where they had heard it or something very like it before. In any case, since it was down for two *reprises* and the *entr'acte*, so much extra emphasis was more than it could well bear.

To this Inman had snappily replied, "Good God, man, it was the opening, after all! D'you ever hear of a first night without one or two short waits? As a matter of fact, this show ran remarkably smoothly for a first performance. If you'd seen what I have——"

Mr Forshaw was not appeased by this reply, neither by being called "man," nor by the hint that he hadn't seen as many first nights as Inman. ("I was running my own shows when he was assistant elec-

trician in my father's theatre at Sunderland!") So he came back tartly with, "Anyroad, her costume was hideous!" That, Inman pointed out, was not her fault. The *Faust* costumes had been done by a woman designer chosen by Forshaw himself. "I," declared Inman, "never can stand her dresses. They make any show look like a touring pantomime."

This was reaching fresh heights of tactlessness, for Bob Forshaw every Christmas, as "Forshaw and Grimwade," sent out not less than eight or ten specimens of that highly lucrative form of entertainment to tour the Midlands and the North. "Say what you like, Arthur," he retorted furiously; "she sang clean out o' tune all t'evening!"

Mr Inman never knew how near he came to having his jaw punched in consequence of the fearful sneer it assumed when the Chairman passed this musical judgment. "Odd the conductor shouldn't have noticed it!" he remarked.

"Well, I *did*!" bellowed Forshaw.

"Extraordinary!" murmured Inman. "I suppose you're quite sure you know what tune she was singing?"

"Look here, Inman!" bellowed Forshaw. "I tell thee she's *out* . . . that girl's *out* . . . and there's no more to be said!"

"Oh yes, there is—plenty!" answered Inman, his exhausted face going taut like stretched parchment. "If she's out, *I'm* out—out of Fizz for good and all! My shows are an artistic pattern; I won't have them pulled out of shape to please anybody on earth—not even if he did build the Royal Metropolitan Opera House at Oldham."

"Nay now, A-arthur!" whined Forshaw, "don't be ha-aasty! To begin with, it isn't true I built an Opery House there . . . you can go and look! . . . And as for Miss Lillian Green——" The debate, as the radio says, continued.

II

Peter was not able to take all these details back with him, because Beryl did not know them all. But he gathered enough from her to be able to telephone Athelstan a good story on reaching Euston; and it was the first thing Athelstan spoke to him about on the pavement outside the *Gazette* office, where his short, stocky figure got out of a taxi just as Peter descended from his bus on the afternoon of the next day.

Mr Rigglesworth had first to dispose of an argument with the taxi-driver who complained of "a very small tip." "If it don't suit you," Peter heard Athelstan roar, "you can drive me to the Traffic Controller at Scotland Yard and we'll see what *he* has to say! I'm Athelstan Rigglesworth, my friend. Maybe you've heard of me before?"

The driver, with cockney patience, winked at Peter. "Can't get rahnd 'im no'ow, can yer?" he said, and Peter realized that the man was proud to be the victim of the great Athelstan Rigglesworth's meanness—he would brag about it in the pub that night.

"Hulloa, Peter!" said Athelstan in the porch, still grinning at his victory. "That was right good stuff you sent from Blackpool. I've taught you one thing, my boy, to use your own eyes. What you wrote about that lousy show of Inman's was *seen*. I can tell the difference always, and there isn't a soul alive can take *me* in!"

"Thank you very much," said Peter modestly as they entered the office together. "Did they give you my message about Forshaw and Miss Green?"

"Yes. It was a lucky thing for you that you ferreted out that business. I'd have sacked you else! I knew all about it."

"No, did you really, Athelstan?" asked Peter cheekily. "How did you get it? Television or a spirit message?"

Athelstan Rigglesworth's swart brows came down over his eyes in a scowl. "I'm not the man who believes in spirits!" he growled. "And don't you get too big for your boots, Mr Warner!"

Peter was, in fact, a little in that mood. Being in love, especially before there is time to think where it is going to lead you, promotes the feeling. So had an interview Peter had been given this morning before coming on to the *Gazette* by the present Managing Director of Percy Peel, Ltd., the famous music publishers. Grey and dry, though courteous, he had certainly not been ecstatic; one realized at a glance that he would never be that. But, impressed by the recommendation Walter Montrose had sent him from Blackpool, he was ready to do business.

He agreed to buy "Ridin' on a Star!" on the usual 10 per cent. royalty—"A contract will be submitted to you, Mr Warner"—and added that he would be glad to see any other work of Peter's and take his advisers' opinion of it.

"I see Mr Montrose speaks of a musical piece about Nell Gwynn," he said, referring to the letter. "He doesn't approve of the subject," he added with a bleak smile, "and there's no doubt there's a lot of risk about these musicals. It doesn't sound very much in our line . . . but you might let us see it."

"I'd be glad to," Peter had answered.

"Yes, quite." The tone of the answer suggested that this went without saying.

"I was hoping," suggested Peter timidly, "that you might perhaps be able to put me on some salary, or . . . or retainer . . . basis, which would set me free for composing."

The Director pursed his lips. "We don't very much favour that sort of arrangement," he answered. "We think it usually turns out unfair to us or to the composer. But there's a possibility . . . just a possibility, you know . . . that we might ask for an option on all your work. . . . Well, you'll let us see what you've done," and he rose for a polite but frigid handshake.

Still, even though Percy Peel, Ltd., had not rushed out into their

corridors shouting for joy at their new discovery, Peter felt that something solid might come of the morning's negotiations, and it was therefore with a slightly distracted ear that he listened to the conference between Athelstan, the Editor of the Entertainments Page of the *Gazette*, and the Chief Home Sub-Editor on how to handle the "break" of a West End star's probable disappearance from the cast of the new Fizz musical. "We could have a half-column interview with her," said the Entertainments man, "if it's true." "Front-page stuff," agreed the Chief, "if you can get it. The public's sick of Musso and Hitler." "But we need confirmation," warned Athelstan.

"I'll get confirmation," said Peter light-heartedly. "I'll run round and see Monty Du Parc at All-Star House. He'll give me anything that can be told."

"That's not what we want," snapped Athelstan Rigglesworth. "We want what *can't* be told . . . what they'd like to keep close if they can. Who'll they get to take her place? That'll be the story."

"Monty's a pal of mine; he'll give me a good pointer," affirmed Peter.

III

A quarter of an hour later he disembarked from a taxi amid the roar of Shaftesbury Avenue at the doors of All-Star House, the head offices of Fizz. Hurrying up a short flight of stone stairs, he pushed open a door under the sign "Enquiries," and entered a waiting-room furnished with a settee and two or three worn arm-chairs, the graves of many youthful, many elderly hopes. One or two dim figures sat there in the light of a bad bulb; but Peter paid no curious attention to them this afternoon. He crossed to a hatch communicating with an inner office and spoke to a pasty-faced girl. "Mr Du Parc?" she answered in a weary monotone. "'Ave you an appointment I'll see if he's in." She took up the receiver of a house telephone and spoke into it, while Peter stood impatiently tapping his foot. "Yes," he heard the girl drawl. "Yes." And turning her head to him, "Mr Du Parc'll see you in a few minutes sir he's engaged just now kindly take a seat."

There was no seat vacant, and Peter stood fuming over these frontier formalities, which were never relaxed at All-Star House, however well-known you might be. At last the telephone buzzed, and the girl, who had been staring in a stupefied way at what looked like a large ledger, digging a pencil the while into the mats of her hair, said without looking up, "Mr Du Parc's disengaged now kindly take the lift first floor second door right Edna did yew sign for that register on the two o'clock post?"

A youth came out of the office and escorted Peter to the lift. The envious eyes of the waiters in the ante-room followed him through the

door. Upon the first floor he was discharged into Monty Du Parc's room and met by the cheery glow of a big coal fire, welcome after the chill below. The carpet was thick and the walls distempered in a dull red, which made a good background for the prints and posters on it. There were a harlequin in green-and-yellow trousers, a ballerina in white skirts and black bodice posing amid a troop of swans with Beardsleyesque expressions, the gargoyle faces of two world-famous Italian clowns grinning at each other through the wreckage of a grand piano. On either side of the hearthrug were olive-green leather arm-chairs; in the centre of the room was an immense chromium-fitted desk protected against draughts with glass screens; and behind the desk was Monty Du Parc, regarding Peter kindly out of his enigmatic, dark eyes. Through the oblong windows behind the desk the sadness of a grey London twilight sighed into the room, and across it winked the advertisement:

PINK STAR WHISKY CURES YOUR BLUES

first in salmon-coloured and then in Prussian-blue electrics.

"Hulloa, Peter!" said Monty, rising and extending a hand. "Bored already with the Blackpool breezes? I thought you were up there for the week. Cigarette?" He held out a looking-glass box. "Turkish this side, Virginian the other. . . . Sit down, Peter; don't make yourself a stranger! Anything we can do for you?"

Peter sank into one of the fireside chairs with a contented feeling. It was good to be greeted like this. Some places you came news-gathering you were treated like sweepings.

"And how's the little girl-friend?" enquired Monty, lighting his own cigarette. "Refined type—but lots of personality in reserve, eh?"

"I'm glad she made such a favourable impression on you, Monty. You're a judge."

"No, no!" Monty shook his head with a tinge of melancholy. "Only a business wallah. All I'm fit for!"

"Don't tell me that! . . . If only you'd heard her sing, though!"

"Strong voice, has she?"

"Splendid!"

"We must arrange that audition as soon as we can, and see that old Bob's there."

"Thanks awfully, Monty. . . . Actually, I came to speak to you about another thing."

"Let's have it. If we can help in any way——"

"You *can*, but you may not want to. If so, tell me frankly. I'd like to know what this trouble about Lillian Green is."

Monty threw up his hands in humorous despair. "So you know too? Where did *you* get it?"

"Not by snooping this time, old man. Bob Forshaw himself let the cat out to me."

"So you know old Bob's back, too?"

"I know he never started."

"You chaps are ferrets! But I'm just as glad it's you, Peter. If anything must be given to the public . . . which I'm not sure yet . . . I'd rather you handled the story than anyone else." He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and wiped them thoughtfully. "It's an awkward business, you see."

"Forshaw, I understand, didn't care for her, and insists she shall be out."

"That seems to be how it stands at the moment."

"Bit difficult, won't it be, though, to rehearse a new soprano in time to open in London week after next?"

"You've a genius for under-statement, Peter. It would be bally awful!"

"I say!" Peter's eyes lit up eagerly. "Would there be a chance for Gail Darien?"

"Might be a chance for anybody! But actually, no, I don't think it'll come to that. Bob and Inman are always bickering like this. That's off the record, of course, old son!"

"Naturally," agreed Peter.

"Old Bob's very autocratic, and Inman doesn't handle him well. Inman's got a very swelled head, through you gentlemen of the Press always saying he's the only producer in London—which is nonsense. And then, you know, for years he's been sweet on the statuesque Lillian, who threw old Bob down with a bump."

"You wouldn't be the least little bit of a bitch, Monty, would you?" enquired Peter.

Monty grinned. "Forget it! Anyhow, I'm not giving myself any headaches about this business. It'll blow over before we open in Town."

"Well, what am I to tell Athelstan?"

"Tell him to hold his hand like a good chap! If there should turn out to be any story, the *Gazette* shall have it exclusive."

"That a promise?"

"Definitely."

"Good! . . . And now, Monty, I'll give *you* a little bit of news—about myself."

"Good?"

"Swell—thanks entirely to you. You sent me to Wally Montrose, and I seemed to click with the old boy. Anyhow, he sent me straight up to Percy Peel."

Monty twisted one of his dabs of moustache. "That was rushing it! . . . Do any business?"

"Yes. Sold them a song I made up while I was in Blackpool on a ten per cent. royalty, to begin with."

"H'm, not too bad . . . and not too good."

"You seem to have big ideas, Monty!"

"For you, yes!" He stared at Peter out of his sad eyes. "In fact, they stop at the sky . . . you lucky swine!"

"Lucky in a pal like you!"

"Lucky in your gift! It'll carry you to the top one day, while the rest of us poor devils will still be struggling in the mob. . . . Never mind! Percy Peel have anything else to say?"

"Vague talk of an option on my future work."

"No doubt. It would suit them very well."

"Well, wouldn't it suit me? They're one of the best of the publishers, aren't they?"

"Certainly."

"Wasn't your idea that Wally might introduce me to them?"

"One has to think twice about these things, Peter. They're a firm with a big reputation, but like the rest, they have to think of Number One. Are you sure, for instance, whether they want you in order to push you or in order to suppress you?"

"Suppress me?"

"They might scent a danger to their own composers in you. Once you're in their hands, they can play you down—can't they? And no other house can get hold of you and make you a rival to their men."

"But surely a firm like Percy Peel would never——"

"I don't say they would . . . but such things have been known. In any case, a huge firm like theirs has too many irons in the fire to have much time to spare for building you up. I should have thought a smaller house . . . the Melodeon people, for instance . . . would suit your book much better."

Peter looked troubled. He knew too much about "what goes on" not to feel the force of Monty's warning.

"Have a drink!" said Monty, crossing to a cupboard and bringing out a bottle of whisky and glasses. "Down the hatch!" They drank reflectively, and then Monty, wiping his lips with a magenta silk handkerchief, asked, "Peter, would you take my advice about this business?"

"Well, of course! Aren't you my family solicitor?"

"Flattered!" Monty laughed. "Well, then, don't be in too much of a hurry to sign anything with Percy Peel."

"Oh! And you think I shouldn't show them my opera *Orange Nell*?"

"Certainly not—at present. Give me a day or two to look round and make some enquiries. It's my belief that there are several publishers . . . well, say, the Melodeon lot, that I just mentioned . . . who would be only too glad to have you, and take a personal interest in your work. You get nowhere nowadays without plugging, and a smaller firm, with fewer commitments, would take care you were plugged. See?"

"I do; though, of course, on the other hand, Percy Peel——"

"I fancy I could get you much better terms elsewhere than Percy Peel are likely to offer. They're stuffy, old-fashioned. . . . Anyhow, think it over."

"I certainly will, Monty," said Peter, rising. "It's very good of you to take the trouble——"

"No trouble at all," murmured Monty.

"And meanwhile, you'll keep us posted about the Green affair?"

"Sure. . . . Oh, and, Peter, just before you go! Can you give me Gail Darien's dates for the next week or two? In case I had anything to write to her?"

"Yes. She's at Longwelly, near Swansea, next week. Then the Connaught, Highgate, and after that, I think, Chatham."

"The Glamorgan, Longwelly," said Monty, making a note. "Then the Connaught . . . Right-o, old boy; I won't forget!"

IV

Monty Du Parc never did forget—it was one of his virtues. He must have busied himself, for instance, with Peter's affairs, for early in the following week Peter received a cordial note from Mr James Harington, the Chairman of the Melodeon Music Publishing Company, inviting him to call at their offices. After a moment's hesitation, prompted by the feeling that he was making a poor return to Wally Montrose, Peter reminded himself that he too had to think of "Number One," and that a call committed him to nothing. He went. The headquarters of the Melodeon people stood in the midst of "Tinpan Alley" and its bustling traffic. Although Melodeon might not be one of the largest publishing houses, there was about its offices, Peter found, a great contrast to the somewhat severe dignity in which Percy Peel had wrapped itself, since Old Wally's retirement, in its sober eighteenth-century house in Newman Street. Melodeon had wide plate-glass windows exhibiting the gaudily tinted covers of its publications in patterns that held the eye; it had abundance of tiny columns, capitols and scrolls climbing its upper stories to the stone trumpets and mandolins crowning the façade; it had an entrance hall like a great hotel; and the secretary who fetched Peter out of it to take him upstairs to Mr Harington was such a dream that it was impossible to understand why she needed to spank the keys for a livelihood.

Mr Harington himself in no way partook of this slightly daunting grandeur. An unassuming, smiling, little man, with the most candid eyes in the world, he greeted Peter in a large room which was penetrated whenever the door from the passage opened by the tinkle of pianos, the blast of gramophones, and the piercing notes of sopranos, combined in a crazy modernist symphony. His first enquiries, surprisingly enough, were after Wally Montrose. "A grand old chap, isn't

he? Worth a dozen of any of us fellows, even at his age. I had such a nice letter from him only a month or two ago." Peter liked that; it took away his uneasy feeling of having gone over to an enemy camp. And now little Mr Harington was speaking of Monty Du Parc. "A grand fellow, Monty, isn't he? He has a great belief in you, Mr Warner, and I haven't often known him wrong. In his letter to me he mentions an opera you're composing. . . . Will you have a cigar? . . . Here's a light!"

There was certainly nothing phony about Mr Harington's cigars, Peter thought, as he explained the idea of *Orange Nell*, adding, "But I've been told lately that there's no interest in period pieces."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," answered Mr Harington; "decidedly, I wouldn't say that. I've a great faith myself in a picturesque, old-world operetta. . . . Look what a pot of money was made out of *Highgate Hill*. And you call yours *Orange Nell*, eh? An attractive title! We'd be very glad to see it, Mr Warner, if you like to send it to us. If it turned out the kind of thing we're after, we might put up a sum of money towards its production at a West End theatre."

"No, would you really?" asked Peter with gleaming eyes.

"It would be in our line. . . . Strictly between ourselves, we're thinking of taking the lease of a theatre for musical productions . . . but that's still in the stage of discussion. Well, I don't mind telling you it's the Margravine Theatre actually. I know *you're* not the man to talk."

("How the devil can he know that?" thought Peter. "He only met me a quarter of an hour ago.")

"Of course," he heard Mr Harington continuing, "if we did anything of that sort, we should hope to have the handling of all your work, Mr Warner . . . make you one of our coming men, you know!" And he laughed agreeably.

"The worst of it is," said Peter, "that I don't get the time I need to work at my compositions. *Orange Nell*, even, isn't finished."

"Well, but we could help you there. We would take a bit of a risk and pay you, shall I say, four hundred a year for three years to set you free for your music and nothing else? Of course, all that you turned out in that time would be ours. What's your reaction to that idea?"

Peter could hardly express it. He felt the heavens were opening and raining down plenty on his head. . . . A safe £400 per annum, that was, practically, £8 a week for three years . . . no more journalism, no more Athelstan, no more worry over those bills from the dentist, the tailor, and the music shop, no more music-copying in the evenings for that infernal agency . . . but above all, no more Athelstan Rigglesworth! Just make his music and draw his monthly cheque! It couldn't be true! "I—I—" he stammered, "should like an arrangement of that sort—very much, Mr Harington."

"Yes? Well, of course, it'll have to go before the Board. But I should think there would be no difficulty."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you," murmured Peter.

"Not at all," beamed Mr Harington. "It'll be good business from our point of view, I don't doubt. Besides the satisfaction . . . and that's a great thing, you know . . . of putting out really good work, as yours is . . . I'm quite sure yours is. Monty Du Parc wouldn't talk in this way about it if it wasn't."

"He's taking me on trust quite a lot," Peter thought. "It shows how it pays to have Monty's backing."

Then a thought struck him. "I ought to tell you," he said, "that I as good as sold my last song, 'Ridin' on a Star,' to Percy Peel a day or two ago."

"Did you sign anything?"

"No. They haven't bothered to send the contract yet."

"Well, then, I should just tell them you've changed your mind. We wouldn't want to share you with Percy Peel, and they won't be anxious to spend their money plugging that song, when they learn you've decided to be one of our men."

Peter was not quite satisfied about his position with Percy Peel, and the conversation hung fire. A telephone buzzed on Mr Harington's desk. "Yes?" he said. "Oh, tell him I'm engaged for just a few minutes! I won't keep him long."

Peter thought this was an old one, but he rose obediently. "I mustn't keep you now," he said . . . and Mr Harington rose too. "Good-bye," he said, holding out his hand. "You'll be hearing from us in two or three days."

The elegant secretary guided Peter through the screeching modernist symphony as far as the lift, and took leave of him with a smile that was the cream on the cake. Peter was not so naïve as to be unaware that Mr Harington had been "putting on an act," but what of it? Melodeon was a solid firm . . . and £400 a year was a glittering prospect! Peter walked back down a Charing Cross Road that had become a *Via Triumphalis*.

CHAPTER SIX

I

"You did it on purpose—you know you did!" screamed Miss Bobo Baggaley at Jack Kelham on the stage of the Glamorgan Theatre in Longwelly, which is almost a suburb of Swansea. The house tabs had just fallen on the last call that could be wrung out of a small and apathetic audience, which seemed to have come in to get out of the rain and now to be only too glad to get back into the rain once more, and Mrs Gynn with heavy tread had marched off to her dressing-room.

"Did what, my dear girl? What did I do?" enquired Jack, fingering the soiled tie of his evening dress, which somehow looked so dazzlingly white from the front. (Can anybody explain the riddle?) "Nita!" he called to his wife across stage. "Do you know what Bobo's raving about?"

"Don't stall, you heel!" shouted Bobo. "Just because Vincent's off ill you think you can get away with any dirty thing, don't you?"

"What have I *done*?" retorted Jack, by this time almost as frenzied as she was.

"Announcing me like that! You're a ruddy fine compère, aren't you?"

"Well, what did I say wrong?" Jack seemed genuinely bewildered. "Nita, did you notice anything?"

"He didn't mean it, Bobo dear," pleaded Nita. "He was nervous and fluffing."

"I *wasn't* nervous and I NEVER fluff!" roared Jack. "I just said what Vincent always says in announcing your number, Bobo . . . and Ananias couldn't say more," he added under his breath.

"I never worked with him," said Bobo contemptuously. "But what you said was, 'Miss Bobo Baggaley has lately been out of the bill through indisposition, but to-night she is *unfortunately* able to be with us again.'"

"Oh, I didn't!" exclaimed Jack.

"You did, dear!" Nita confessed. "I went all cold when I heard you."

"Good Lord! I wondered what they were roaring for . . . I say, it was rather good, though!" He tried to swallow his laughter.

"Good!" yelled Bobo. "You wait till Mr Gynn hears about it. He'll let you know if it was good—you rat!"

"I'm sorry, Bobo, old girl! Honestly I am!"

"You dirty clod!"

"Forget it, dear, and come and have one at the Artistes' Bar!"

"You *amatower*!"

Jack's great egg-face flushed crimson. "L-look here!" he stuttered. "I'm damned if I'll p-put up with that sort of language from you or anyone else, my girl! Just you understand that when Mr Gynn is off I . . . I . . . I am ruining this show . . . *running* it, I mean! . . . What in hell's the matter now, Jim?"

The stage door-keeper was standing by with a card in his hand. "Is Miss Darien here, Mr Kelham?" he enquired.

"In her room," snapped Jack; and noticing the chorus and others who had been hanging round delightedly listening to the row, "Can't you girls go and dress? D'you want me to fetch Madam to you?" he shouted at them, and went off to his own room, grumbling at Nita.

"Did you say that card was for me, Jim?" enquired Bobo, who seemed suddenly to have recovered her good-humour.

"No, Miss," answered the man sourly. "For Miss Darien . . . a gentleman asking for her."

"Oh, let me see!" Before he could stop her Bobo had tweaked the card out of his hand and read the name on it. "Never heard of the fellow!" she declared, and as the door-keeper protested, "All right, old dear! I shan't deefile it!" she told him, and made a face at his back while he went off muttering towards the dressing-rooms.

"A gentleman to see you, Miss!" he called, knocking on the door of the tiny room like a strip of passage which Gail and Derek had to themselves, thanks largely to the unwillingness of the men of the company to have Derek in to dress with them.

"I wonder—could it be Peter?" Gail cried, swinging round from the dressing-table, a grease towel in her hand and a shade too much pleasure in her tone.

"Why should it be?" growled Derek, who was tying his tie with care before the glass. "Any card?" he shouted to the man outside.

The door was opened a crack, and the door-keeper's hand appeared holding the card. Derek took it from him. "Mr Montgomery Du Parc, 23B King Edward Mansions, Hyde Park, W.I," he read. "I don't think I—"

"Yes, you do, of course you do!" Gail jumped off her chair. "It's Peter's friend in Fizz . . . Monty Du Parc! We saw him at Black-pool talking to Peter."

"Oh yes, I remember now," conceded Derek. "Still," he eyed the card suspiciously, "there's nothing about Fizz here. . . . But I suppose he'd better come up. Show the gentleman up, Jim! . . . You decent, Gail?"

She nodded. Her eyes were shining. This was the first break in a dismal week. Besides the ceaseless rain, there had been an epidemic of what the medical profession don't like to call influenza running through the company. Vincent had been out of the bill the whole week so far; Bobo had been out for two days (though that certainly was no loss), and Gail herself had had a cold. The Glamorgan Theatre, Longwelly,

was one of the most depressing of the No. 3 dates in that part of the world, and so far they had not fallen to No. 3 dates. Instead of the cheerful willingness of, say, the Emporium, Blackpool, the stage staff were completely uninterested in them; the stage itself was in an advanced state of decay, and Jack Kelham had put his foot through it the night before just as he was going on; hot water in the dressing-rooms had never been heard of . . . and in default of a letter-rack at the stage-door, the company's mail was left in a very odd place, on the assumption that everybody must visit it (since there was only one) at some time during the day. At their digs the most noticeable things had been the alarming texts on the walls and the discovery (unexplained) of a hollow tooth between the sheets. It was not surprising that Gail had become a different woman from the moment the door-keeper had introduced that slip of pasteboard, or that even Derek, who was assuming elaborate indifference, buttoned and unbuttoned his double-breasted jacket with a restless hand.

II

A knock fell on the door, and they looked at each other. Then, as Derek only licked his lips nervously, Gail cried "Come in!" On her invitation there came gracefully into the room the tall man with the crinkled blue-black hair and brick-red complexion whom she had seen talking to Peter Warner in the lounge of the Clifton at Blackpool. "Good-evening!" he said with a cordial smile. "I feel I ought to apologize for this somewhat mysterious entrance. I would have asked Harmon" (this was the local manager) "to bring me round in the ordinary way, but the fact is, I wasn't wildly keen for Harmon to know I was staying over in Swansea to-night. I don't know," he looked towards Derek, "if I ought to introduce myself any further? I represent Fizz with the Press—"

"I'm sure you don't need to introduce yourself, Mr. Du Parc," said Derek with his hard smile.

"Really?" Monty beamed at him. "Well, then, you'll understand the situation when I tell you there's a bit of a deal going on over a certain theatre in a neighbouring town; and if I'm seen anywhere within twenty miles, rumours get about that maybe Fizz or maybe Popular Playhouses are interested; that's always the way, isn't it? That was why," he turned to Gail, "I preferred to take a check for the gallery . . . what a dust-bin! . . . and see what I could of your show from up there. . . . Yes, I will sit down, thank you, Mrs Vortigern; don't clear that chair, the basket will do for me. Smoke, Mr Vortigern? Turkish this side, Virginias the other! . . . I'd quite forgotten you'd be here this week, till I saw your names on the bills."

"I wonder you *could* see them," said Derek moodily. "There's going to be trouble about that!"

"Well," laughed Monty, "you weren't quite invisible. So here, I thought, is a happy chance to hear the voice that has so captivated Peter Warner!"

"He's a great friend of yours, Mr Du Parc, isn't he?" said Gail.

"Peter? He sure is, Mrs Vortigern. I believe in that lad. He's got what it takes . . . here!" Monty tapped his forehead.

"You think so?" asked Derek, lifting his eyebrows.

"Why, yes! Don't you, Mr Vortigern?" Monty swung round, regarding Derek.

Derek shrugged. "I'd say the theatre needed a very different type of mind to-day."

"You mustn't take my husband too seriously when he's in a chip-ping mood, Mr Du Parc," put in Gail. "Actually, I'm sure he thinks the same as we do about Peter."

Monty arched his eyebrows playfully at Derek, and was turning back to speak to Gail when the door was burst open and Bobo Baggaley, in a dressing-gown, pranced into the room. "Gail, darling," she shrilled, "could you lend me your . . . Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't know you had anybody!" She broke off in an attitude of embarrassment that left one fat pink leg protruding through her wrap; then opening her heavily blacked eyes at Monty, who sat studying her dispassionately through the smoke of his cigarette, with one ankle swinging in a gay silk sock, "It's Mr Rutherford, isn't it?" she asked. "We met at the Ivy, didn't we?"

"I'm afraid not." Monty smiled and shook his head.

"How silly of me!" Bobo stood staring blandly round, waiting to be introduced. As neither Gail nor Derek showed signs of doing this, "Been in front?" she asked Monty. "Like the show?"

"Bobo," said Derek. "If you'll excuse us——"

"D'you want my hard brush, dear?" asked Gail. "Here it is. Bring it back to-morrow, won't you?"

"Ta, darling!" answered Bobo. "Good-night, all!" And with a manslaying glance at Monty, she skipped through the door, leaving it open behind her.

Derek kicked it to with a scowl; then abruptly got up, opened it, and, after looking right and left down the passage, carefully closed it again. . . .

But Bobo had gone to the dressing-room she had to share in this theatre with most of the other female members of the company, including the comedian Jerry Carpin's wife and his sister-in-law, who played minor parts in his sketches, and the attractive wife of the Indian Magician, who passed him handkerchiefs, cylinders, and rings during his act, and was ill-rewarded by being sawn in half at the end of it.

"Who was that feller in with Gail and Derek to-night?" asked

Bobo, as she struggled into her plum-coloured trousers with the chalky stripe.

"What was he like?" asked Mrs Carpin, from the mass of pink lather covering her face.

"Tall, dark, bit dago-looking," answered Bobo.

"Oh! it must be the tailor," said Mrs Carpin.

"What tailor?"

"Chap from Birmingham . . . travels all over the place. He comes to see Derek often; Derek gets all his clothes from him, and Gail sometimes picks up bargains, too. . . . He always dresses very flash."

"Oh!" said Bobo in a disappointed tone. "I thought perhaps——"

"Perhaps what?" enquired Mrs Carpin as she dried her face.

"Oh, nothing! I just thought——" replied Bobo, tying up her head viciously in her mosaic handkerchief.

In the Vortigerns' room, meanwhile, as soon as Bobo had been disposed of, Monty Du Parc went on as if there had been no interruption.

"You have a very charming voice, Mrs Vortigern," he said; "quite out of the ordinary. I expect you've been told that?"

"I had a shocking cold to-night, I'm afraid."

"I didn't notice it. Your singing's very good."

"People have been kind enough to say so," admitted Gail, fingering an eyebrow pencil on the dressing-table. "But the managers don't seem to have got round to it yet."

"Oh, that's just a matter of timing," Monty assured her. "You have to approach 'em through the right channels, and above all at the right moment. Otherwise you might be Carmen Miranda or Jeannette Macdonald, and there'd be nothing doing."

"Actually," said Derek, "we had more or less arranged for Mr Forshaw to hear my wife sing."

"Peter Warner was trying to arrange it," corrected Gail. "By the way, did he know you were coming to Longwelly, Mr Du Parc?"

"I didn't know myself, my dear! I told you." He chuckled. "It'll be a surprise for old Peter."

"I was saying," interposed Derek, "when Gail interrupted me, that I had arranged with Mr Forshaw for her to have an audition." He had flushed a little, and his voice had gone up. "He told me to ring up his secretary as soon as we got back to Town."

"A-ah!" Monty shook his head. "Let me give you a word of advice, Mr Vortigern. Don't put your trust in Miss Easy! Her name's most misleading. She's a perfectly savage watch-dog; won't let a soul get near the Chief if she can help it. It doesn't much matter whether he says he'll see you or not. If she doesn't want him to——" He ended with a gesture.

"Well," said Derek crossly. "Can *you* tell us the proper approach, Mr Du Parc? He ought to hear Mrs Vortigern sing!"

"I'm with you . . . absolutely!" murmured Monty, gazing at Gail out of large, softened eyes. She shifted in her chair and turned her face towards the mirror. "I may be only a business wallah," continued Monty, "but I have my hunches sometimes, and they're apt to be good ones." He laughed on a pleasant, velvet note, then changed his tone. "I believe you go to London next week?" he said, turning to Derek.

"Yes. We're playing that ghastly mausoleum, the Connaught, in Highgate. . . . I really don't know why I put up with it."

"Then," said Monty, looking towards Gail again, "you'd find it perfectly easy to come up West for an audition, if we wanted it, wouldn't you? By the way, what arrangements have you with old Vincent—I'm sorry to gather he's down with a cold."

"Well," said Derek, "we're signed for the run, but he can't hold us to that."

"Are you sure?" demanded Monty. "Anyhow, I think that if I spoke to him . . . we're pretty old pals."

"You've something to offer us, then?" asked Derek tensely.

"We-ell," Monty laughed, "you mustn't press me too far at this stage. It's just a possibility—for Mrs Vortigern, but she might not think it worth while to take it. I say!"—he looked at his slim gold wrist-watch—"I'm keeping you gossiping here when you must be wanting your supper."

"Not too much," said Gail ruefully. "Last night our landlady had the bright idea of serving up a hare we bought in its fur with a bit of parsley nestling coyly between the paws. . . . Ugh!"

"Can't we meet to-morrow?" asked Derek. "Would you lunch with us in Swansea?"

"I'd love to, but I must get away by the breakfast train, I'm afraid. As it is, my desk will look like a snow-drift when I get back. Nobody can help me with *my* work, unluckily."

"But it must be very interesting work?" suggested Derek.

Monty made a face that seemed to cause his two little dabs of moustache to stand vertically one above the other for a moment. "I don't know," he said slowly. "It isn't quite the job I'd have given myself, somehow."

"Not enough scope?" hinted Derek.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. You can always find plenty to do in any job, if you throw your heart into it. That's my way. I can't bear to sit about. I must work twenty-five hours a day, or I'm bored to tears."

"So I gather you're rather more than Press Representative for Fizz?"

"Well, I am and I'm not. Sort of odd-job man, you know. There are so many things in a big organization like Fizz that are just

nobody's business . . . and yet somebody has to see they're done. . . . I *must* be off. . . . Oh! just one thing before I go! I shouldn't tell anyone I've been here if I were you . . . not yet. It's such a lousy world we live in. As soon as anybody gets the ghost of a chance, there's always folk who must rush in behind their backs to spoil it for them."

"You've said it, Mr Du Parc!" assented Derek warmly. "For authors it's even worse! You daren't mention an idea for fear of some bright spirit stealing it. And there seems to be a ring round managers to prevent your plays being read. You'd scarcely believe it, but I've a three-act piece in my brief-case over there . . . thoroughly modern . . . gripping from start to finish . . . and I've been carrying it round for four years without being able to interest a soul in it!"

Monty shook his head. "Such a lot of funny business!" he murmured. "And you never know who's putting the spoke in your wheel. That's just what I want to spare your wife if I can. She doesn't deserve it!" He looked towards Gail with a smile of almost fatherly affection.

"Mr Du Parc," said Gail suddenly, turning to face him. "I wouldn't like Peter Warner to feel hurt over this."

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Derek.

"Well, you know, he was rather making it his business to——"

"Oh, don't you worry about that!" interrupted Monty. "He and I are the closest of friends. He'll be delighted when he hears I've been to see you. He's as keen as knives for you to become the big noise. . . . I say, though, what a dreadful thing to tell a singer! Good-night! . . . Good-night!" and he laughed himself out of the room.

On his way to the stage-door he almost collided with Miss Bobo Baggageley, coming up from the under-stage bar where the artistes repaid most of their salaries each week. "Good-night!" he said gallantly, lifting his hat. "'Naight!" said Bobo with her nose in the air. "Jim, have you got a parcel for me?" and she nearly knocked Monty's horn-rims off as she dashed past him into the door-keeper's hutch.

III

In the Vortigerns' dressing-room there was a moment's silence after Monty's departure. Then, "Wonder what *his* racket is?" remarked Derek.

"Why *must* he have a racket?" asked Gail. "He scouts for his firm, I suppose. Any harm in that? Especially when he shows such good taste." She looked at herself in the glass and removed an uneven edge of lipstick with her little finger. "I admit," she added, wiping the finger on a towel, "that he has a way of looking at you as if he were in love with . . . himself. But that's a mannerism most good-looking men have."

"Call him good-looking with that nose?" exclaimed Derek. "But you're right; he certainly is devastatingly pleased with himself."

"Or wretched," said Gail, passing her outdoor dress over her head. "I wonder. . . . Anyhow, I don't see why he shouldn't be on the level with us."

Derek snorted. "You know nothing about the world. . . . Never will, in my opinion! Anyone's only got to sugar you up a bit! . . . When will you learn that everybody's got a game of their own? Try to get on with honest work! . . . Write what you think! . . . Show 'em the truth as you see it! . . . And where does it get you?" He looked round the confined, dingy dressing-room. "The Glamorgan, Long-welly!"

Gail laid a hand gently on his arm. "I know, Derek!" she said. "You've worked hard enough—God knows!"

"Yes, I don't think anyone can deny that."

"And you've had such rotten luck!"

"Oh, I know I'm a failure, thank you! You don't have to rub it in!"

"You know I didn't mean that, Derek! Besides, we're both much too young to talk of being failures."

He squeezed her hand for a moment; then let it drop. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know I'm insufferable! But can you wonder I'm soured, seeing poppycock written by men with a tenth of my talent run for hundreds of nights in London! . . . Watching ham actors, who died years ago, but won't lie down, posing and bellowing to packed houses! God! Can I help it if it makes me bitter? . . . I wonder you stick to me, Gail, after all my failures."

"You know I'm not the sort of woman who sticks to her husband just because she believes he's going to be a success!"

"Lucky! Because you don't believe it any longer, do you?"

"I do, Derek. I'm sure the big chance is coming soon, dear!"

"For you, perhaps; not for me. Though I must say you'd better not sing off the tune at this famous audition the way you did to-night . . . I'm telling you, my girl!"

Gail compressed her lips. "You never miss the chance, do you?"

"Well, would it be kind to flatter you? To say you're marvellous when you've still so much to learn? That's not *my* idea of kindness."

Gail picked up a vermilion lipstick and began to make streaks on the oilcloth of the dressing-table. "I know it isn't," she answered. "Though I don't think you quite realize, Derek, how much one can do with a little . . . just a little . . . encouragement. . . . Still, that doesn't matter. This is a hard profession, and I'm learning to take it. What I miss is kindness . . . just a little of it . . . in our ordinary life together."

He turned his head sharply. "What on earth do you mean? You're not trying to make out now that I'm a brutal husband, are you?"

"Oh no! Still, you could be just a little more," she coloured faintly, "a little more . . . loving . . . couldn't you?"

"I'm not a sentimental chap, if that's what you mean? You must have known that when you married me."

"When I married you you made me feel I meant a lot more to you . . . yes, a whole lot more . . . than I seem to do these days."

Her mind ran back five years, and she saw the young man who used to go into the pit every night during the fortnight's run of the unsuccessful English opera *Queen Guinevere* in which she sang the part of Elaine. He would take her out afterwards to supper in Soho, to tell her how "significant" she was, and how much more she would signify if she took his advice and gave up the teaching of Bem Middlemast—"He's the Lost Chord, my child, and nobody's going to look for it any more!" She hadn't minded the ferocity of Derek's criticisms then, because she knew that he had big ideas for her. He had even written a Surrealist poem, which he assured her was about her, for a Bloomsbury magazine, which had unfortunately ceased publication when the poem was still in proof.

When they were both out of work they had still more time to sit in the Café Royal while he told her what he was going to do to the theatre, and on their way back from far suburbs, where they had seen repertory companies in draughty halls, he would amuse her by his denunciations of the conventionalism of Capek, the bourgeois mentality of Chehov, and the staleness of Pirandello. At one house of a friend of his, where they went to parties dim with orange shades and cigarette smoke, there was a grand piano, and there she would sing songs chosen by Derek to his accompaniment, and afterwards receive veiled congratulations, sincere or spiteful, on her luck in being the chosen woman of the man of the future.

Most of which she discounted with a native common sense; but it filled the gaps in an empty life (for nobody seemed to want her for any show), and Derek in those days was never dull. He was far more distinguished than the "boys" of most of her girl-friends in the theatre; he was very much in love with her; and, if unimpressive in appearance, a much more exciting lover in the flesh than the chill of his mind would suggest. She also believed him when he said that he needed her; that there was a woman (he generously owned it) in the background of every great artist's success; and after they had been intimate for three months she had acquired a sense of responsibility for him that overshadowed all her other thoughts.

When they decided to get married there had been a tremendous row, not only with Bem, who said she had ruined herself as an artist, and took a throat-swallowing farewell of her, rather in the vein of his renunciations of princesses and thrones in Viennese *operettes*, but also with her Mother, who called Derek a beggar and a "won't-work."

Their early married years could hardly be called years of struggle, even though most of Derek's plays remained unproduced, and the two that were produced, one in Glasgow and one in Bristol, were failures, because Gail, once she had reconciled herself to touring in revue instead of waiting for Grand Opera to come to her, made a tolerable living for both of them. But veils of illusion had worn thin; Derek in disappointment at Blackburn or Accrington was cruelly different from Derek dividing the world at the Café Royal . . . and the worst was, he had gained the power to hurt her . . . damnably.

He was sensitive enough to realize that at this moment. "I'm sorry," he murmured, laying his hand a moment on her shoulder where she sat, her head propped on her knuckles, looking wearily discouraged. "I feel as if I'd no softness left in me. I've had a raw deal from life, you must allow. Not one bit of good fortune since my father went broke in business and Cambridge was o-p-h! Not one single lucky break!"

Gail winced, and he frowned irritably. "Oh, I don't mean it that way, you know! . . . I can't talk to you if you're going to take everything to yourself. . . . I meant that I seemed doomed in my art . . . my career, God help me! As for the rest, I know I'm not good enough for you. As I said just now, I wonder why on earth you stay with me."

"And so do I," Gail flashed round on him, "when you talk like that! All the rest I feel . . . as a rule . . . I can put up with. But lately you're letting everything go!"

"Oh, come now, that's not fair!"

"Yes, it is, Derek! You say people are against you. What do you do to win them over? You say you can't get decent jobs. Do you wear your shoes out looking for them? You complain that managements won't look at your plays. Don't you write them in a style that puts the ordinary manager off from the start?"

"I hope so! I'm not pandering to the commercial theatre!"

"I didn't ask it! But there's common sense in these things! Then again, you admit you neglect me . . . and so you do. You admit you're unkind . . . I wish I could say you weren't! But you do nothing to put it right. You let things drift from worse to worse between us——"

"I hadn't noticed they were drifting from worse to worse, as you call it!"

"No, you wouldn't!"

"Nor would you have got the notion," he jerked out spitefully, "if that fellow Warner hadn't come to Blackpool making sheep's eyes at you and flattering your voice. . . . The hell he cares for your voice, my dear!"

"You're being mean, Derek! Shut up!"

"I won't shut up! I *am* your husband, however much you may now regret you ever married me. And for your sake as well as mine, I don't

choose to see you making a fool of yourself. . . . Oh, you needn't flare out!" he added, retreating a pace or two as she leapt from her chair. "I'm only warning you! Keep it to the *business* side!"

"You——!" A queer grimace twisted her face; she turned from him, and dropped back on to her chair, covering her face with her hands and sobbing in gasps.

"Oh, my God!" said Derek between his teeth. "Forget it, Gail!" He tried to put his arm round her shoulders, but she repulsed him.

"This is the way it always ends, isn't it?" he said, looking at her desperately, with his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. "You and I, we just can't help hurting one another, can we? . . . You don't mean to hurt me, and you do it. And I don't mean to hurt you, God knows, and I do it. . . . And what the end's going to be I can't imagine!"

As he said these last words Gail looked slowly round at him, almost as if she were seeing him for the first time, and over her tear-stained face there passed an expression approaching fear. Then, seizing her bag, she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, and used the powder-puff vigorously. "It's terribly late," she said in an unemotional voice that yet trembled a little. "The stage-door'll be locked; we'll have to go out by the front. Have you got your torch?"

"We shan't be the last," said Derek. "The bar will only just have closed."

In silence, like a pair of ghosts, they made their way through the pass-door into the darkness of the stalls, guided by Derek's torch, which threw up by pale patches the ramshackle Victorian finery of the auditorium. From the theatre entrance came a glimmer of light, and as they ascended the stairs to it they heard a scolding voice.

"Did you promise I could have a box for my friends or did you not?" it asked shrilly.

"I did, certainly," came the propitiatory voice of the house manager. "It was all the mistake of the girl in the box-office."

"Oh, come now, Harmon, don't hand me that!" was the reply in the same tense, high-pitched tone. "I haven't been thirty-five years in the business to swallow 'the girl in the box-office,' you know!"

"Well, I can assure you nothing of the sort shall happen again," replied the manager.

Gail and Derek, reaching the top of the stairs at that moment, saw him bent deferentially before a vacancy. Then as, hearing their steps, he turned round, there was disclosed what seemed to be a small child in a long overcoat and a black hat slouched to one side. From its lips protruded a cigar that looked immense.

"Hulloa, Ernie!" enquired Derek, his sardonic humour roused. "Ticking him off?"

"Good and proper!" said Mr Harmon, wiping his forehead. "But I hope Mr Wensley knows we didn't mean it."

"Oh, there's no malice," replied the midget. "But I'm the last man on earth to be took liberties with. . . . Good-night, Derek. . . . Good-night, Gail m'luv!"

As she and her husband descended the outside steps and turned the corner, there was a patter of feet up the stair from the stalls, and Bobo Baggaley rushed through the tiny entrance-hall waving a large, swollen-looking handbag. "'Night, Ernie, pet!" she cried, nearly trampling the midget down. "Can't stop! Miss Otis regrets she's unable . . . to-night!"

"What's the hurry, Bobo? Chasing the Fizz man?" the midget called after her acidly.

"What Fizz man, Ernie?" she asked, swinging round in the doorway.

"Monty Du Parc," replied Ernie. "Didn't you notice him prowling round behind? I was sure he'd come to offer you big money!"

"You don't mean the dark fellow with the Charlie Chaplin moustaches?" shrieked Bobo.

"M'm," said the midget, rolling his cigar between his lips with glee.

"Oh!" cried Bobo. "O-o-oh!" Her mouth crumpled, and tears flooded her wide, shallow eyes.

"Cheap little twist!" growled Harmon as she went up the street, still sobbing. "Illiterate, too!"

"I believe you, my boy!" The midget winked. "And what's more, I could make a good guess at the father!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

PETER WARNER stopped just inside Monty Du Parc's room at All-Star House with a look of amazement.

"Well! . . ." he said.

Behind the table with the glass screens beamed Monty, his horn-rim glasses catching the pale autumn sunshine like diamonds. In one of the green-leather arm-chairs by the fire, smoking a cigarette with just a trace of nervousness, sat Gail Darien. She looked amazingly elegant in the well-looked-after fur coat that Derek had given her just after their marriage out of the windfall of a small legacy, and her hair shone under a hat with blue feathers secured by a ribbon under her chin. She looked up at Peter as he came in with a smile that seemed half-affectionate, half-anxious.

"Startled, old lad?" enquired Monty. "Didn't expect quite such a treat when you got my message, did you?"

"I certainly didn't!" agreed Peter, looking at Gail with an irradiated face that seemed to embarrass her, for she dropped her gaze to the tip of her cigarette. Monty watched this by-play for a moment with fixed, melancholy eyes.

"Well, what's the big idea?" enquired Peter, looking from one to the other of them.

"I'll tell you, trouper," said Monty, with a brilliant smile. "In about a quarter of an hour from now"—he glanced across at the green marble clock with black onyx beans for figures over the mantel-piece—"at three, in the Brecknock Hall, Miss Darien is going to sing to the Chairman and Zharkov. I've had a word with Grigori about her, and he's very much interested. . . . You see, Peter, I don't let the grass grow."

"I'll say you don't!" answered Peter with a touch of envy in his voice.

"Peter," said Gail quickly. "I meant to write to let you know about it, but it all sort of happened at once!"

"Never mind how it happened!" answered Peter. "It's grand!" His brown eyes suddenly flamed behind his gold spectacles. "Monty!" he cried, taking a pace towards the desk. "Lillian Green! . . . You weren't thinking of Gail to take her—"

"Now, now, Peter!" Monty wagged a reproving finger. "Don't rush your fences! Let's wait for Mr Forshaw to say anything there may be to be said. He might have some good news for you, Miss Darien . . . and I don't think it can be very bad anyhow. Now," he jumped up, "I think we ought to be stepping across. . . . Let me

help you!" He held out his hands to replace Gail's coat, which she had slipped off her shoulders, but before he could reach her she had swiftly done it for herself. "One thing old Bob's terribly fussy about," continued Monty, without a flicker in his smile, "is being kept for a single minute . . . when he *does* deign to turn up anywhere himself."

"I suppose," Gail asked, "Peter couldn't come along? Or is that dead against the book of rules?"

"We-ell," Monty screwed his mouth up with the movement that made his moustaches stand nearly vertical. "It's not *usual* to——"

Peter came tactfully to his rescue. "I'd better not, Gail," he said. "This is a sort of family council of Fizz, and no outsiders wanted—eh, Monty?"

"Don't you call yourself an outsider, or you'll make me angry!" answered Monty. "But it is a fact, Miss Darien, that old Bob always says he can hear with his own ears on these occasions. . . . I'm not so sure myself that he knows one note from another, ha! ha! . . . But the customer's always right, isn't he? . . . Especially when he's such a tough customer . . . and such a very big one, eh?"

"Well, then, Peter," asked Gail, picking up her portfolio of music, "can you bear to wait for me on the doormat, and give me a cup of tea afterwards?"

"What's all this about doormats?" exclaimed Monty, aghast. "Peter'll stay put in that arm-chair by the fire and wait till I bring you back. Here's the cigar-box, old boy"—he unlocked a drawer in his desk—"then, when it's over, we're all going to have tea here together cosily . . . and talk things over."

"Thanks, old man," said Peter, helping himself to a cigar. "I shall be on tenterhooks to hear the result."

"Don't worry! We'll beat the tape to it! And now, Miss Darien, we *must* be off!" said Monty, wriggling into his navy-coloured frieze overcoat, picking his pearl-grey hat off a peg, and glancing into a mirror on the wall, to give his moustaches a swift twirl. "Miss Serle!" he called sharply, opening a door into an inner room, "have those letters ready to sign when I come back! You needn't take all the afternoon about them, you know!" He turned to go; then stopped and thrust his head through the door again. "If Gauntletts' ring, just say it's too late! I waited in for 'em all the morning. . . . Now, Miss Darien, we haven't a minute! . . . Oh, excuse me!" He dashed back from the passage and shouted through to the secretary, "If Mr Inman calls me, say I'm out and will ring him back later! . . . Come along, Miss Darien, we shall have to *run*! It's not far enough for a taxi."

II

They crossed Piccadilly Circus, Monty keeping a pace behind Gail, and noting the queenly way in which she walked straight ahead, as

though it were the duty of the traffic to avoid *her* . . . which, in consequence, it did. "The manner of a star already!" he told himself, with a side-glance at the dainty poise of her feet in their worn but polished court-shoes. "I wonder—I wonder!"

He drew level with her as they gained the pavement. "Hope it didn't worry you at all," he said, "my having to choke dear old Peter off a bit . . . I mean, about coming with us to the audition. If it had been your husband now——"

She turned her head sharply. "Derek had to see our agent this afternoon. It was an urgent call, or he would have come with me, naturally."

"Quite, quite!" murmured Monty. "Who is your agent, may I ask?"

"Stulitzer."

"Dear old Joseph!" said Monty fondly, but with a regretful intonation suggestive of a wreath laid on a tomb. "Here we are! No lift, I'm afraid!"

Somewhere between the Criterion Theatre and Haymarket corner they had gone through an arched door and down a long corridor that ended in a stone staircase. Up this they climbed two stories (with repeated apologies from Monty) and entered a dingy ante-room, through the windows of which the façade of the London Pavilion, smothered in posters, lifted the classic triangle of its pediment against the autumn blue with the gaudiness of a stage-cloth.

The room in which they stood led through a row of thin pillars, curtained except for a central opening, into another, longer one from which came the sound of somebody playing—surprisingly—a Brahms piece upon the piano.

The Brecknock Hall was a relic of the eighteen-sixties, now buried amid the reconstructions of twentieth-century commerce. It had been the seat of Masonic banquets, then in latter Victorian days the concert-room of a famous Christy minstrel troupe, then a moderate-price restaurant, then a club for producing the "experimental" drama, with a small stage on which the experiments could be made. Finally, it had been rented by Fizz for rehearsals, auditions, and extra office space.

"Straight through," said Monty encouragingly. "I can hear Doherty . . . that's our accompanist . . . playing his favourite Brahms to refresh himself. He needs to, poor devil, after the hours he spends whacking out their stuff for crooners and tap-dancers." Monty lowered his voice. "Doherty would have been on the concert platform to-day, but for Pink Star, you know. . . . Why, Mr Zaleski! I didn't expect to meet *you* up here!"

In the opening between the curtained pillars had suddenly appeared a figure, looking rather like a waxwork. It was that of a short, thick man, with a sallow complexion and eyes as small, glittering, and un-winking as two black beads. On his head a greasy brown hat was set

at an acute angle; and he wore a long overcoat with braided facings, a huge garnet in his necktie, mourning edges alike to his starched collar and the nails of his splay fingers, and shoes that were a fantasy of different-coloured cloth and leather. This was Ivan Zaleski, the fourth member of the Fizz directorate, whose origins, like Zharkov's, nobody knew, except that it was plain he had stemmed from some Slavonic ghetto in Poland, Russia, or the Balkans. His interests stretched from theatres to treacle, from pepper to pomades, from South Coast piers to South European railways. Looking at him, it was difficult to believe that so much money, fructifying in such a variety of fields, bore the smear of his black-banded thumb. By what arts had this unimpressive little barrel of a man acquired his multiplied holdings and network of controls—for if there was any tongue in which he could express himself, it was certainly not that of the country whence he chose to operate.

"Look, dear," said Monty to Gail, "you have the good luck to meet our director, Mr Zaleski. . . . Mr Zaleski, this is Miss Gail Darien, a new song-bird I hope to have caught for us."

Zaleski tugged the ancient hat off his head, revealing a yellow and pathetic baldness that made him look twice the age he did before. "Pisha-metya," he mumbled unsmiling, holding the hat out stiffly as if for coppers. Then, replacing it at an even more perilous angle than formerly, "Manta!" he said, raising a finger.

"Excuse me a moment, dear, will you?" said Monty, and withdrew with Zaleski behind the curtains.

Through them came a guttural murmur, pierced by Monty's fluting tones. "Who? . . . Who? . . . No, you mean Behrenson, don't you? He's at Manchester . . . *Manchester* I said, not Manager. . . . Yes, he does manage, of course. . . . Where? Oh! the Palladium, Oldfield, I think . . . Oldfield in the Midlands, nothing to do with *goldfields*. . . . Well, he may have gold shares, I don't know. . . . No, Mr Zaleski, we shan't lose anything by the arrangement. If there should be any loss, it must fall on Behrenson. . . . What's that? You can't do without Jews? . . . Oh, *shoes*! . . . No, you won't be walking about without shoes, Mr Zaleski! At the worst, there's always the Old Age Pension for us all, isn't there? But don't worry, I'll get a good show in the Northern papers. . . . Are you off now?"

Mr Zaleski walked with downcast head into the ante-room; then turned and said loudly, "Im frobinshial spress."

"Certainly!" called Monty. "In all of 'em!"

Zaleski turned again and hurried past Gail with a jaunty, bobbing walk, reminiscent of a small tradesman hurrying to oblige a customer. As soon as he had disappeared, Monty emerged from behind the curtains and came up to Gail. "You know," he murmured, "he was here really to give *you* the once-over. Can't imagine how he hears of everything. You'd think he was hidden under every office desk in London!"

"He doesn't seem to be waiting to hear me sing," remarked Gail in a disappointed voice.

"Oh, you bet he'll be around!" answered Monty. "Shall we go in?"

III

They passed into a long, narrow room with the daylight shut out. A few dim electrics showed two blocks of chairs, with a passage between them, running up to a vacant space, where was a piano with a bulb over it. Beyond again rose, almost in darkness, a tiny stage, at the back of which, by a faint glow from the side, could just be discerned the figure of a man in shirt-sleeves pulling some bits of scenery about.

On the piano stool as they drew near they saw a poorly dressed little fellow, with a grey fringe round the back of his dented bald skull. He was playing with enthusiasm, swaying forward and back, to a large, imposing man in a broad-brimmed black hat, the fumes of whose cigar stole upon Gail and Monty as they advanced like incense offered to his grandeur. He turned his head at the sound of their steps, and Gail found herself under the stare of two fish-like black eyes set in a heavy face lined with dissipation.

"Afternoon, Grigori! Afternoon, Al!" said Monty with equal geniality towards *maestro* and accompanist. "Miss Darien, meet . . . Mr Zharkov." His voice sank respectfully on the last word, and Gail could not resist a faint tremor at his change of tone.

Zharkov, however, did not appear to be in an intimidating mood. He did not remove his wide hat, it is true, but he grinned ingratiatingly at her, disclosing pointed teeth brilliant in places with gold. "So you are come to sing to us this afternoon, my dear, eh?" he asked. "Monty tells me he was very much impressed when he heard you at . . . that place. I hope you are in good voice this afternoon, eh?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr Zharkov," answered Gail, her trained self-possession restored. "I'm quite ready for the test when you are."

"Yes, but we must wait for Bob Forshaw; he's not here yet, I think. Have you seen him, Monty? . . . No? . . . Have you, Al? . . . No! Always late, eh? But then he has so many affairs!" He set his cigar to his lips again, and blew a cloud in Gail's face, which made her cough slightly. "He vill be here soon," said Zharkov, without apology, "and meanwhile, my dear, if you will excuse me, I vish a word with Mr Du Parc."

He drew Monty away into the embrasure of one of the heavily curtained windows. "So this is the one?" he asked in a low voice. "The one you vish to put in place of Lillian Green. . . . The beautiful unknown—it is she?"

Monty passed a finger delicately over his moustaches. "There was a—a—suggestion," he admitted.

"From you?"

"In a way you might say so. . . . That is, I considered various possibilities, you know . . . I wanted to help old Bob out of a hole if I could. But, of course, it was essential you should hear her before anything was done."

"She is not beautiful," said Zharkov, looking across at Gail for a moment where she stood by the piano chatting to Doherty. From the stage faint noises broke the silence, as the man in shirt-sleeves was palely visible tugging at a flat. Monty made no comment on Zharkov's remark.

"You know," resumed Zharkov, turning back to Monty, "I am with Bob about that Green."

"Oh! You thought she gave a bad performance at Blackpool, too, did you?"

Zharkov waved his cigar. "Her performance! . . . Her performance was what it always is . . . neither better nor worse. But I am tired of her. She makes trouble in the theatre. . . . She has insulted me!" he added dramatically. "I would be glad to see her *oudt*!"

"What a silly girl!" said Monty. "But, you know, Grigori, the public, they eat her up."

"The public! The public!" Zharkov contemptuously scattered cigar ash round him. "Don't talk to me of your *Eenglish* public!" he added with the peculiar venom of the refugee towards the nation guilty of harbouring and prodigiously enriching him. "What do your *Eenglish* public know about singers? They are told this Green is marvellous. Now we shall tell them, if we wish to, that this other one over there is . . . smashing, don't you say? They will believe it, if you write it, Monty."

"If it were no harder than that——" murmured Monty.

"Well, we shall see," concluded Zharkov. "I am glad to be shut of Green, anyway! We will put in her place perhaps this girl, perhaps some other . . . I don't know yet. But have you thought what Inman will say?"

Monty's mouth hardened. "I think Mr Inman's said too much already. The Chairman's had about enough of it. Can you blame him?"

Zharkov grinned. "You wouldn't be sorry to see Inman go, would you, Monty?"

"We should all be sorry to see him go. But it isn't fair the Chairman should have all this trouble."

"You are very loyal to Mr Forshaw—aren't you, Monty?"

"I'm loyal to Fizz, Grigori. The show must go on!"

"Oh, it vill," Zharkov assured him ironically. "Now, there is another matter——"

Meanwhile Gail had stood watching the little old man with the watery eyes, who was still playing the piano with rippling sweeps to amuse himself. Presently he looked up at her in a friendly way.

"You're for an audition, aren't you?" he enquired. "Would you be feeling nervous now?"

"No," answered Gail with a smile.

"Ah! That's bad!"

"Why?" asked Gail.

"You can't set much store by your future, I'm thinking, if you're not worried. . . . No ambition?"

"Suppose I have, how would it help for me to come unstuck just when I've got to do my best to impress these great men?"

"I can't tell you that. But it seems to me every artist must feel a fire in's belly—excuse the word—at a critical moment of his career. I always did before going on to the platform to play."

Gail smiled again. The little wreck amused her. "You were a concert player, weren't you, Mr . . . Doherty, isn't it?"

"Aloysius Doherty . . . but you wouldn't be knowing my name. It was never large on the bills. You know what it is being a professional concert pianist, God help you! This week solo at Queen's Hall, and it's the Nine Choirs of the Holy Angels you'd believe are listening to you! . . . Next week, the Pier, at Mudcombe . . . and the next *finis!* But for all that my heart-strings were always in a tremolo when I was on the bill. I remember that night at Queen's Hall, when I couldn't remember the first notes of my part at all, at all, while the orchestra were playing the introduction to the concerto. I thought I'd just go mad with terror, when Sir Henry Wood he turned and winked at me with the eye the audience couldn't see . . . so he did! . . . and after that it was *all* all right! . . . Still, I think that was the way I first began to take that damned drop," he added with a sort of rueful serenity.

"You didn't sound nervous when you were playing to Mr Zharkov just now."

"Ach, *him*, is it? . . . He likes to listen to my bits and pieces. But would he give me a job to-day? He would not. And it's right he'd be! I'd let him down. It's the damned drop that does it, d'ye see?" He beamed up at Gail, and then suddenly his expression changed to a scowl. "I wonder when it is they'll condescend to be giving you your trial! They dragged me in here half an hour before closing time for nothing in the world . . . so they did!"

Gail disliked his look at the moment, so she made some excuse to stroll forward and examine the little stage. For a minute or two she stood peering into the shadow, watching the grey-haired man in shirt-sleeves, with a cap on his head and a red handkerchief twisted round his neck instead of a collar, fitting bits of scenery together to make a french window. At last he seemed satisfied, and stood back dusting his hands. Then he turned round and nodded at her, and she stepped back with an "Oh!" as she recognized the crimson face of Bob Forshaw.

He grinned at her bewilderment. "Tha' didn't expect to find me

doin' this, eh, Miss Darien?" he asked. "But, yo' see, I'm an old-fashioned showman that can do things for hissel'; it saves a lot o' brass. That window now! I knew we had it somewhere here, and it'll go into a show we're startin' round suburbs next month, and save us thirty-five shillings . . . that's one Mr Zaleski didn't think of! . . . Well, tha's coom to sing to me, Miss Darien, hasta? . . . Chuck thy music to Doherty and start! I'm listenin'." He turned his back on her, and drawing a folding-rule from his pocket began to make careful measurements of his window.

Gail was completely taken aback, and stood wondering what to do, when Monty and Zharkov came smiling down the central gangway, drawn by the sound of Forshaw's voice.

"Bob!" called Zharkov. "Why have you kept us waiting all this time? Don't you know time is money?" he added with heavy-handed chaff.

Bob looked over his shoulder. "Money?" he asked. "I thought you great artistes never took thought for t'brass! . . . It's your *pocket* I'm takin' care of, lad! . . . Come, Miss Darien, get crackin'! Let's hear thee chortle, lass! Are you ready there, Doherty?" And he turned his back again.

Gail hesitated; then seeing both Zharkov and Monty seat themselves attentively in the front row of chairs, she shrugged her shoulders and passed her music to Doherty.

The first song she chose was, "Come, Hero Mine!" from *The Chocolate Soldier*, and certain scrapings and tappings that continued behind her as she sang put a passion into her voice that probably improved the effect, though it was not the passion of love that inspires the song.

At the end she looked round towards where she had last seen Forshaw standing; but his head bobbed out through the wings in quite another place, and he enquired, "Any more?" It was not an encouraging invitation; but since Zharkov and Monty maintained a church-like silence of expectancy, and Doherty nodded to her reassuringly, she sang the waltz song from *Glamorous Nights*, during which it seemed to her that she saw Mr Zaleski hovering for a moment or two at the far end of the hall. When she had finished, as nobody made a sound, she began to roll up her music. Zharkov and Monty rose promptly, and the latter said, "Thank you very much, Miss Darien."

Zharkov then went to the front of the stage and called, "Bob! Bob! Where are you?" but no answer came. He turned round and spread out his hands in an indignant gesture towards Monty. "Mr Forshaw'll have gone down the little stair at the back and out, I expect," suggested Monty. "He'll have remembered some important appointment probably."

"Yes!" protested Zharkov with a fine burst of chivalry. "But when this young lady takes the trouble to come here on purpose——"

Monty turned to Gail with a smile. "Miss Darien will understand how rushed Mr Forshaw always is. We shall write to her without delay."

"Yes," muttered Zharkov, "of course . . . of course! . . . Mr Forshaw and I will write to her. But still——" He looked round again for the evasive Chairman.

"Look, Grigori!" said Monty. "I'm taking Miss Darien back to the office for a cup of tea. . . . I'm sure she must be wanting it badly. If Mr Forshaw contacts you, will you ring my room?"

Zharkov nodded sulkily. "Good-day, Miss Darien. I'm sorry . . . but you see how it is here——" He shrugged his shoulders to express the burdens laid upon him.

Gail, looking rather depressed, followed Monty down the room. Suddenly she stopped. "I forgot to thank Mr Doherty," she exclaimed, and ran back to him. "Thank you ever so, Mr Doherty," she said. "You're my dream as an accompanist. I'd like to have you always to play for me if my husband hadn't got the job first!"

"And isn't it myself that was the fool," replied Doherty, beaming at her, "the way I'd be letting him muscle in before me on both the jobs? Thank you, thank you! It's the sweet voice you have. Only I'm wondering what they'll be making of it here."

"Money, I hope!" laughed Gail.

"I hope so, too, for your sake, sweetheart! Only"—an evil gleam shot from his watery eye, and his mouth turned down at the corner—"beware of the snake in the grass!"

Gail started at his tone, and her eye caught Zharkov pacing up and down in front of the minute stage in a cloud of cigar-smoke. Then she looked back to Doherty, but he was collecting books of music with a hand that had begun to shake violently. Gail knew the symptoms, and turned from him sadly.

"Coming, Gail?" called Monty's pleasant voice from the ante-room, and she walked slowly on to rejoin him.

"You sang very well, my dear, very well!" he said, patting her affectionately on the shoulder in the dusk of the stone staircase. By an instinctive movement—for she hated to be "pawed"—she disengaged herself, so that his ringed hand fell on the air. Then, turning to him with a touch of remorse, "I don't know how to begin to thank you for all the trouble you've taken, Mr Du Parc," she said.

"No trouble, dear!" he assured her, peering forward from the step above her as a ground-glass window at a landing suddenly exhibited her face in a tragic, bluish light. "We don't call it trouble to help friends, you know!"

They came out into Piccadilly Circus. Twilight was falling, and all round them the electric signs were beginning to stretch themselves and blink, while the arc-lights shot out their circles of radiance. As they did so, the sky that had been for some time drawing a fine grey veil over

its face behind the charcoal lines of the telephone wires was banished into a barely perceptible background. It was too early, yet, for it to return in black plush with the night.

They waited a moment on the kerb to let a stream of traffic glide round the corner, and Monty pointed to the names in lights over the neighbouring theatres. "See 'Gail Darien' there too some day," he remarked, "and before long, if you ask my opinion!"

"You think so really? . . . I wonder."

"Don't wonder!" he told her. "Make up your mind it *shall* be! . . . Don't cross yet! Wait for the lights!" He held her back.

"I suppose," she said fatalistically, "if I have the gift, I must get there."

"The gift alone doesn't always do it. You need folk to help you, folk who believe in you."

"Like Peter Warner! Yes, that helps!"

"Oh! Peter's not the only one, believe me, and perhaps he's not the one who'll be able to help you most in the long run. Because I'm sure you have it in you to go far . . . very far, if you have the will to. You see, I've been thinking a lot about you since we first met last Thursday at Longwelly! You're quite a tyrant, you know, the way you impose yourself upon a man. That's personality, isn't it? You're a great deal more to me already than a mere singer. There's something unique about you . . . I could do with knowing you a whole lot better. I want a long talk with you about your future—somewhere where we shan't be interrupted every five minutes. We might drive out to Richmond to lunch one day in my little two-seater. What about to-morrow, or the day after?"

"I'm sure it's very kind of you, Mr Du Parc," said Gail. "But I doubt if I can manage it this week. My husband and I have several people to see . . . if Fizz don't want me. But perhaps we could all lunch together the next time we're in Town. I'd love it."

"That's a date," said Monty calmly. "But we mustn't let the grass grow, if we're not to miss our chances."

"Aren't we letting it grow now?" asked Gail. "The lights have changed twice." Without waiting for his answer she stepped off the pavement in her usual confident way, ignoring a private car, uncertainly driven, that came jerking round the corner on the amber. Monty, who had kept close to her, pushed her forward into safety by the elbow, and then laughed as he restrained her from meeting the bonnet of a No. 13 bus. "My God, you are a responsibility to convoy!" he told her. "What'll Fizz do to me if I let anything happen to you?"

He had her fast by the arm now, and she could not well get free before they came to the doors of All-Star House. Then she released herself under pretext of looking for a handkerchief in her bag, and without waiting for the lift walked up the stairs ahead of him.

IV

As they entered Monty's office Peter Warner sprang from his arm-chair, dropping an *Evening News* on the floor. "Well?" he asked eagerly. "How did you get on, Gail?"

She laughed at his boyish excitement. "I think it's for *him* to say"—she indicated Monty.

"How did she do, Monty?" demanded Peter. "Come! Spill it!"

"Just a minute, old lad," replied Monty, and opening the door into the secretary's room, "Bring us some tea, Miss Serle," he called. "Three cups!"

"Well?" asked Peter again. "What did old Bob say?"

"Half a second!" Monty, holding the door open still, asked Gail if she preferred Indian or China tea.

"I don't mind, Mr Du Parc, thank you," she told him.

"You any preference, Peter?"

"No, no, none at all!"

"China, then, Miss Serle!"

"Monty, I want to hear about the audition!" cried Peter.

"I'm just coming to it, old lad. . . . Oh, by the way, I forgot to ask, either of you take sugar? . . . No? . . . No sugar, then, Miss Serle."

"Was it a success, Monty?" insisted Peter.

"You'd like some biscuits, wouldn't you, Miss Darien? I'm afraid we don't run to bread and butter here."

"Yes, if it's no trouble, Mr Du Parc."

"Not the least. . . . Some sugar biscuits, Miss Serle! . . . Now, Peter, what is it?"

"The audition, Monty! Will you tell me how it went?"

"Very well . . . very well indeed, I thought, though, of course, I'm only a business wallah."

"But Forshaw? Zharkov? Were they impressed?"

"They ought to have been. In fact, I'm sure they were. Only——" He hesitated.

"Only what?" asked Peter anxiously, while Gail looked surprised.

"Oh, nothing tragic!" said Monty, slowly twisting his moustache.

"I was only regretting a little that Gail didn't sing the *Madame Butterfly* aria this afternoon. Grigori would have appreciated that. If you want to get over with Grigori, it's no use giving him the light stuff; he requires the real operatic dope."

"I was afraid," said Gail, distressed to learn of her mistake, "that that piece would be too long."

"Well, they'd come to hear you, hadn't they? You could have had all the time you wanted. As it is, they haven't heard you in the stuff which ordinary light sopranos can't tackle and you can, which is rather

a pity." His eyes had grown sad and troubled, and he removed his glasses to wipe them thoughtfully.

"But, Monty, why didn't you give her some pointers on what to sing?" Peter reproached him.

"Honestly, I didn't dare to!"

"It didn't seem to me," complained Gail, "that Mr Forshaw wanted to listen to *anything* I might sing."

"Oh, more than you think!" answered Monty, blowing on his glasses.

"Oh! don't mind him, Gail!" said Peter. "I never knew a man so variable in his opinions. . . . Now, aren't you, Monty?"

"Maybe. I'm a cautious chap. But I can assure you I've never for a moment varied in my opinion of Miss Darien. It was only——" His voice died away as he lifted his cup to his lips.

"Look, Monty!" pleaded Peter. "You can surely give us a plain answer to this question? Has Gail any chance of——"

The telephone interrupted as if with a crisp sense of drama. Monty reached out for the receiver. "Speaking! . . . Oh yes, Mr Forshaw. . . . At once? . . . I'll be right along!" He rose, with his face alight. "That was Bob!" he said. "Now we'll hear something."

"Monty," said Peter, his voice strangled with excitement, "I know what a lot *you* can do with a word of the right kind——"

Monty looked across to Gail; his eyes in their melancholy seemed extra large. "That boy," he told her, "thinks I can do a lot more than I can."

For what she did next Gail hated herself, but she felt desperate at this critical hour for her future. "Do your best for me, please," she said, smiling at Monty. "I look on you as a real friend already," and lowering her curly lashes she shot him a mysterious glance from under them. ("Make what you can of that!" she thought, inwardly raging. "It doesn't mean a damn thing!")

Triumph overspread Monty's face. "That's very charmingly put!" he said. "Very! You can count on your Uncle Monty! . . . Now I must dash! It never does to keep these big bugs waiting. Old Bob may be three ideas ahead of you already!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

WHEN he entered the Chairman's room upstairs, which, with its fumed-oak chairs, brass-studded upholstery, and vivid red-and-green filing covers, looked like a furnishing firm's window display of an "Office Suite," he found Forshaw seated at his desk, still playing with his foot-rule, and Zharkov in an arm-chair nearby, silently smoking.

"Well," asked Monty, "and what do you think of that young woman?"

"How mooch does she want?" demanded Forshaw.

"I said, what do you think of her?" repeated Monty.

"And I said, how mooch does she want? . . . Is she free?"

"Hardly!" laughed Monty. "But I think she'd be reasonable."

Bob Forshaw looked at him severely. "Have you been goin' round t'theatres lately, Monty? Is it there you hear these foony things?"

"Sometimes," agreed Monty.

"Do me a favour, then! Don't tell 'em to my comics. They're corny enough as 'tis."

"I'm sorry, Chief!" laughed Monty. "You meant, is Miss Darien under contract to anybody, didn't you?"

"I presumed to press my curiosity so far."

"Well, actually, at the moment she's with Vincent Gynn and his *Vanities of Vienna*. But if you want her . . . there'll be no difficulty."

"She doesn't expect a Lillian Green salary, I hope?"

"Is she to have Lillian Green's part?"

There was a moment's tense silence, in which Zharkov turned his large, heavy head to watch Forshaw.

"Is she, Chief?" repeated Monty.

"Happen!" replied Forshaw. "But *not* at Lillian Green's salary, and you can tell her that with my respectful compliments!"

"That *all* I'm to tell her, Chief?"

"No. Tell her to start rehearsin' at once . . . to-morrow. I'll settle terms—has she an agent?"

"Yes." The shadow of a smile flitted over Monty's face. "Joseph Stultitzer."

"Eh, we'll have no trouble with him! Joseph's a very good friend of ours. . . . But she must get crackin' on rehearsals. We haven't too much time, and I'm noan keeping theatre dark all next week!"

"You don't see any other difficulty, Chief?" asked Monty with lifted eyebrows.

"Mr Bloody Inman? . . . He can laike it!"

"But if he doesn't like it?"

"He can do t'other thing! I'm Managing Director!"

"Quite right, Bob, quite right!" broke in Zharkov. "It's time we had what you call . . . a show-down . . . with Inman!"

"Maybe, Grigori, you'd like to be the one to have it?"

"No, no!" Zharkov scowled. "Monty can tell him!"

Forshaw chuckled. "You have some bright assignments, don't you, Monty?"

"I don't mind!" declared Monty, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses. "But you realize, I suppose, that if you put Miss Darien in, Mr Inman may walk out on the rehearsals?"

"That is so!" Zharkov squirmed nervously on his chair. "What shall we do then?"

Bob Forshaw smiled mischievously. "What's your idea in that case, Monty?"

"It would need some thinking over, Chief," answered Monty.

"Nay, I don't think so. It seems to me very plain. You brought this girl in, Monty. If Inman won't rehearse her—do it yourself!"

Monty's lips parted, and a deep flush welled up under his brickish complexion.

"Well?" demanded Forshaw impatiently. "What's to do with thee, now? . . . Dunnot look like virgin at sack of a city, Monty!"

"But, Bob!" protested Zharkov. "Monty's a man of business. He never dreamed of stage direction!"

"Didn't he? Happen I know Mr Du Parc better than you do, Grigori. . . . Come on, Monty! This is what you've been angling for, isn't it?" His eyes glinted sardonically behind their thick lenses.

"No, I must really object to that, Chief!" declared Monty. "I haven't 'angled,' as you call it, for anybody's job. . . . You keep me quite busy enough on my own! I admit I've never understood why Mr Inman should dictate to men like you and Mr Zharkov whenever there's a difference of opinion; but beyond that I've never even hinted——"

"That you had ideas of your own about production, eh, Monty?"

Monty shrugged modestly. "Well," continued Forshaw, "time has come to try 'em out! I'm sick o' Mr Inman. If he refuses to rehearse Miss Darien, you'll take over, and if he wants explanations refer him to Board! He shall have 'em!"

"I won't let the grass grow," Monty assured him.

At that moment one of the six telephones on the Chairman's desk rang, and after identifying it with difficulty, Forshaw listened for some moments, frowning and muttering. "Eh? . . . Oh, it's you, Zaleski! Would you confer an extraordinary kindness on me, and try to say something that can be understood by a man of my poor education? . . . Miss Gail Darien, ay! . . . I suppose that's the name you're losin' your pennies after. . . . Oh! You approve of her, do you? . . .

That's a great consolation to me, as Managin' Director, to have your permission to proceed! . . . Thank you!" He was about to slam the receiver down, when he was checked. "No!" he bawled. "No! I haven't looked into the question of what we paid that chap. . . . It will mean lookin' through three years' pantomime accounts! . . . *Thank you!*"

II

After the other two had gone, Forshaw sat alone for a long while staring glumly at his blotting-pad. If his partner Arthur Inman at crises (of which the present was one) exasperated him to fury, his partner Ivan Zaleski did something worse—he hurt him. With all his faults Bob Forshaw loved the theatre. He loved all the different smells of it, from size to grease-paint; he loved the illusion of tinted lights and clever scene designs; he loved getting difficult productions on to recalcitrant stages, stunning his audiences with tall and lovely women or fooling them with ancient jokes in new frames. He basked in applause; and was furious with anyone who wrote an unfavourable notice of his show, even in the smallest of those provincial papers which he professed to scorn, and whose corruptibility he so loudly, and so untruly, proclaimed. Moreover, though he loved money (which he called "t'brass," because that had a jollier, more jingling sound) and was of unrivalled dexterity in cutting expenses and shaving salaries, he was also capable of "splashing" thrice what was needed on some darling scene or effect, or paying a swollen salary to some marvellous "discovery" of his.

He felt therefore a creeping repulsion from a man whose life was just the chilly, implacable building up of financial power, and for whom the theatre ranked as mere merchandise, like his treacle or his pepper or his Turkish railways. Bob felt himself personally flouted and humiliated by Zaleski's incredible meanness. The man would spend his nights going over every expenses sheet with his jet finger-nail and his imitation lapis-lazuli pencil. This scene could have been supplied by some mass-producing Studio for a quarter the price Forshaw had paid an expert scenic artist. That new costume worn by the Boy in the Blackburn pantomime was unnecessary, since the one worn by last year's Aladdin at Dudley could have been adapted. Such and such a comic had taken ten pounds less a week from Isidore Raymond, and anyhow, was in debt and should have been beaten down to it by Fizz. . . .

You might control pepper or potted shrimps by these finicking, cheeseparing methods, but not theatrical enterprises! How, Bob would demand in a fury at his club, could the "cre-a-tive artist" be expected to do his work under those conditions? Could George Black (whom Bob had taught all he knew) have done it? Could George

Edwards—to whom Bob's father had shown the ropes when he was a beginner at the Gaiety? Nay, could Sir Augustus Harris himself—whose right-hand man at Drury Lane Bob's grandfather had been? And the worst of it was, as Bob would admit with a doleful shake of his head, you couldn't do without Zaleski; no, you could do nowt without Zaleski's money in these bad days.

Sometimes, he almost looked back with regret to the times when in workman's overalls he used to work twenty hours a day, now with the carpenter's hammer, now with the electrician's pliers, now with the script-writer's blunted pencil in his hand, putting on small revues which he had written, devised, engaged the company for, painted the scenery and fixed the lighting for, produced and rehearsed himself, with nobody daring to raise his voice in opposition, unless he wanted to be slung out on his ear. It had prematurely aged him (so he always said), and the profits, when you looked back on them to-day, had been insignificant. But that had been cre-a-ation; "Ay, bai gum, it had!"

So the all-powerful Chairman of Fizz, who was worth at any given moment—he couldn't possibly have said what, sat and brooded, alone in his room, while the gloom deepened, and, from outside, the tips of the illuminated letters that read "PINK STAR WHISKY CURES YOUR BLUES" peeped at him like elves.

III

After Monty had gone upstairs, Peter and Gail, left alone in his æsthetic office, had sat conversing in low voices over their cigarettes, trying to hide their nervousness from each other. At length Gail gave up the pretence.

"I wonder," she sighed, "whether anything will come of this after all? I doubt it, Peter."

"But why? Are you afraid you didn't sing your best at the audition? That's probably fancy."

"Oh, I expect I was as good as I can be. . . . If that were all."

"What are you afraid of, then?"

"The funny business that goes on."

"Not with Monty, I assure you. You can trust him absolutely. He likes to show off his importance, but he's a real pal."

Gail was silent, looking at the bars of the fire. Then, "I'm not clever, you know," she said. "The very first agent I ever went to, a big man, too, told me he could get me anywhere."

"Why didn't he get on with it?"

"It was my fault he didn't. He made it only too clear that I would have to take him . . . well, as fellow-traveller, and I thought the ticket cost too much. . . . I'm a fool!"

"Depends how you look at it," said Peter rather awkwardly.

"Oh, I am, I know. . . . Anyhow, I feel I threw away any chance I had this afternoon."

"You mean by choosing the wrong music?"

She gave a bitter twist to her lips. "Yes," she said. "I didn't sing the right song at all this afternoon."

Before Peter could question her further the door was thrown open and Monty Du Parc, triumph in his face, his walk, his gestures, strode into the room. "Well, *mes enfants*," he cried, "did you think I was never coming back? Do you observe white whiskers sprouting?" He stroked his cheek.

"What *do* you mean, Monty?" enquired Peter.

"Do you hear no sleigh-bells, see no snowflakes? Too bad! Then I must announce myself—Santa!" He bowed elaborately to Gail.

"Cut it out, Monty, do! Can't you see she's in torment? What's wrong with you this afternoon?"

"Wrong! . . . After that I've a good mind to disappear up the chimney—with my sack! However . . . I'll be magnanimous and tell you. . . . Miss Gail Darien, I am instructed by Mr Bob Forshaw to offer you Miss Lillian Green's part in *I Like You, Lady!* when it opens at the Stadion next week, Miss Green having decided to retire. Mr Forshaw's ringing up your agent now, I expect. Further, in his own elegant diction, Mr Forshaw desires you to 'get crackin'' at rehearsal at the Stadion to-morrow morning at eleven. . . . And I'll have to get crackin' with the publicity . . . keep me up all night!"

Both Gail and Peter had sprung up exultantly at his announcement. "Good egg, Monty!" cried Peter, deeply moved. "I knew it was coming off!" He began to pace the room in his excitement.

"Lillian Green's part in the West End!" said Gail in an odd, little, tremulous voice. "Oh! it couldn't happen to *me!*"

"Wake up!" exhorted Monty. "It *has* happened. This is no pipe-dream, lady!"

"Oh!" Gail's face was suddenly convulsed by anxiety. "I forgot! Vincent Gynn! . . . Mr Du Parc, Derek and I are signed for the run with him!"

"Don't worry about that, my dear! See Vincent as soon as you get to the theatre to-night and tell him the whole story. He'll not be so mean as to stand in your way when you get a chance like this. You can play out your week with him at the Conn and—where does he go from there?"

"Chatham."

"We'll dig up somebody to take your place and open there with Vincent . . . that'll be easy. . . . If you like, I'll phone Vincent myself at the theatre during the evening and explain."

"It would be kind if you would."

"O.K. That's settled. Now, what's the next headache?"

"None!" She went up to Monty, her eyes shining with a touch of moisture, and held out her hand. "Thank you, thank you!" she said. "You've been—you've been marvellous."

"Only too happy!" He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it ceremoniously.

"I told you, Gail!" exulted Peter. "He's a friend in a million, isn't he? . . . Trouper, Monty!" And he gave him a slap on the back which nearly knocked his glasses off.

"Thanks, old boy!" coughed Monty. "What do you do to people who annoy you, though?"

"I must be getting along," said Gail. "I want to catch Vincent the moment he sets foot in the theatre."

"And you'll want to tell Derek, too," suggested Peter.

"You bet I do! Can't you hear him saying, 'H'm, might be worth considering'?" She laughed gaily.

"Good thing for you, Gail, you have somebody to check your capers!"

"Pig! . . . Go and find a taxi! . . . You're coming up to the Conn with me, aren't you?"

"Well, I *ought* to go to the paper——"

"No, Peter!" said Monty. "Not a word until I give the 'all right.'"

"Just as you say, Monty . . . We'll go together, then, Gail."

"Good-night, and again thanks a million, Mr Du Parc," she said.

"Monty—*please!*" he begged.

"God bless, then—Monty!"

IV

As the taxi swung in and out of the traffic going up Shaftesbury Avenue into Bloomsbury, Gail sat silent. Peter, watching the lights they passed shine and dim on her face, felt as though it were dissolving and re-forming—at every moment a different woman's. Now she would appear even haggard; then the warm gold light from some big sign would give her back to him, red-lipped and bright-haired, as it might be a girl of eighteen.

"I still don't believe it," she said at length.

"Why, what did you suppose they had sent for you in all that hurry for?"

"Well, I did think they might possibly have some little bit for me in their new show . . . but to take Lillian Green's place!"

"You'll take it in a way that'll make folk forget she ever had it!"

"Poor Lillian! It sounds mean, when you put it that way, Peter. She's such a nice creature, underneath all that 'temperament,' when you really know her!"

"I'm afraid," laughed Peter, "we can't look at it from that angle. Life's a battle! At any rate, you didn't intrigue to get her out."

"I surely did not. Still, it's an uncomfortable feeling."

They were whizzing now through the dimly-lit squares of Bloomsbury, and Gail fell silent again.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Just dreaming."

"Dreaming of your name in lights over Piccadilly. 'Gail Darien in *I Like You, Lady?*'"

"No; something rather different, Peter dear."

"Really?"

"Yes, my name in lights, if you like, over Piccadilly—but in something of *yours*, Peter!"

"Could be, lady!"

She turned her head sharply towards him. "You never told me! Any good news, Peter?"

"Quite a bit! The Melodeon people seem sold on the idea of taking me and my *Orange Nell* up in a big way. Percy Peel were interested, too, but not so ready with terms."

"But you didn't prefer Melodeon to Percy Peel?"

"Why not? It was Monty's advice."

"Peter, be careful, please!"

"What of?"

"Don't make a false step at this moment! You may be so sorry one day."

"Don't worry! I'll look after Number One. I couldn't afford to turn down Melodeon's offer—a three years' contract, you know. I felt a bit of a worm towards Wally Montrose, who had been so good to me and sent me to Percy Peel. But what can I do? I've written two or three letters to him to explain, and torn them all up."

"I wonder why Monty was so keen on sending you to an inferior firm like Melodeon?"

"I was a bit surprised myself, and I mean to ask him what he has at the back of his mind."

"D'you think you'll ever know that?"

"Gail! You haven't got a wrong idea about Monty, have you?"

"Maybe it's wrong."

"You owe him a lot, you know!"

"And you a lot! But I expect you're right. He's been terribly kind, and it's stupid to get so suspicious. . . . Funny! Only last week I was warning Derek against the same thing. He always believes people are getting at him."

"Well, ask him to look over your contract with Fizz when it comes!"

"Oh, my agent will see to that all right. . . . Hulloo, there's the Archway! We'll be there quite soon. Are you coming round afterwards?"

"I'm afraid I simply must go home and type out some stuff for

Athelstan Rigglesworth for the last post. I shall slip in for a little while in front, to hear you sing, and then dash away."

The taxi had stopped outside the grey, rococo façade of the Connaught Theatre, Highgate, which always reminded Peter, when he passed it, of Miss Havisham's decayed wedding-cake. "Just after six," said Gail, looking at her watch before she jumped out. "I may have time for a word with Vincent before we ring up."

As the taxi drove away, Peter took her hand. "Good luck!" he said. "Let me know what happens!"

"Yes, I'll be seeing you. Oh, Peter, I'm so very bad at saying thank you . . . you saw how awkward I was with Monty!"

"You don't need to feel awkward with me . . . and we'll take it as said. Good-night! I mustn't make you late!" He watched her running lightly down the long stone-paved passage to the stage-door. There she turned and waved to him before disappearing. He swung round, and sought the front of the house.

V

When Gail, after leaving Peter, burst into the dressing-room, where her husband was already making himself up with a towel round his neck, and announced her great news, he sat for a moment, with a tube of No. 5 in his hand, looking as if he had received a blow on the head.

"Well!" she cried. "Aren't you going to congratulate me? Aren't you pleased, Derek?"

"Pleased! Of course I am! It's—it's wonderful." He turned to the mirror, rubbed a little paint on his face, then let his hand fall, discouraged, on the table. "All the same," he said, "what a rotten silly business it is!"

"What *do* you mean?"

"This! . . . Just because they've had a row with Lillian Green! But for that you might have gone on for years trailing round with Vincent Gynn. . . . By the way, do you think he'll let you go? I doubt it. We're signed for the tour, remember!" Derek hurriedly wiped the beginnings of a smile off his face and muttered, "Just like the old rat-bag to go and spoil everything!"

"But you always said," cried Gail, "that he couldn't hold us to it!"

Derek shook his head. "You'd have to have a better reason than just . . . well, you can try, anyhow."

Gail dressed and made up at record speed; then hurried to the manager's room and knocked on the door. She was told to come in, and found Vincent Gynn, already in his evening suit, reading letters, while Mrs Gynn was completing her make-up by lavish applications of an enormous powder-puff.

The manager pulled a long face when Gail told her story and made her request to be freed. "Well, I don't know, at all," he grumbled.

"You don't know!" burst out Wanda, turning round in her chair. "But I do! I nevaire 'eard such a t'ing, Miss! You are signed with us and with us you stay!"

"It's terribly important for me, Mr Gynn!" pleaded Gail.

"And it's just as important for us!" retorted the manager.

"I'd stay to the end of the week, of course."

"Big of you, Miss Darien! But it doesn't seem to me you have any choice."

"I'd find somebody to take my place at Chatham."

"We don't want a strangaire, Miss!" cried Wanda. "Do you t'ink I will 'ave no matter who to rueen my *poses classiques* by singin' de accompaniments all wrong?"

"I know it's awkward for you, Mrs Gynn," said Gail humbly. "I'm sorry, really I am, very sorry that it's happened like this. But it's my big chance, you know!"

"And who are you to have de big chance, Miss, when your bettaires dey have to go on, year by year, *en tournée*. . . Mr Gynn, 'ee should have de big chance in de West End! You are young, you can wait! . . . What for do you t'ink we are on the road . . . to make de shop-window for you?"

A tap fell on the door. "Telephone for you, sir!" said the door-keeper's voice.

"Ask Mr Kelham to see who it is!" shouted Gynn.

"They said it was a personal call for you, sir, from All-Star House."

Vincent Gynn looked across to his wife with slightly lifted eyebrows. Then he rose and went quickly out of the room.

Wanda glowered at Gail. "So you are very important, isn't it, Miss?" she said. "Dey phone about you from All-Star House. Oh, la! la! la!" and she threw the articles on her dressing-table about with a furious hand.

"Wanda," said Gail, approaching her timidly, "have a heart!"

Wanda turned upon her with a face of such twisted bitterness that Gail recoiled. "When you have known what I have known," she said, "talk to me about a 'eart—you pretty doll! I have seen the way you walk about . . . as if the theatre were yours, isn't it? 'I am young . . . I am so pretty . . . I am so clevaire!' Well, this will be a lesson to you!"

Gail spoke no more, and in a minute or two Mr Gynn returned with a troubled expression. "Look, Gail!" he said. "Understand definitely that I'm not giving you any release—yet!"

"I should 'ope not!" cried Wanda. "Are you mad, Vincent?"

"Just a moment, m'dear!" Vincent sent her a warning glance. "To oblige Fizz," he said to Gail, "who are in a very bad hole and have

asked me to help them out, I have consented that you should rehearse with them to-morrow. But that's all. The matter is still under discussion, you understand?"

Gail felt from his tone and Wanda's furious looks that the battle was won. "I do indeed, Mr Gynn," she said. "And thank you, thank you very much! I do appreciate your kindness." Vincent Gynn gave her an oily smile and patted her arm while the strains of the overture finishing came faintly into the room. "All right, little girl, all right!" he said. "I'm not one to stand in anybody's way . . . if I can help it. Run along now, Gail, or you'll be off!"

Gail had a last glimpse of Wanda, standing with her fat hands on her hips and eyeing her husband with the gleam of a jungle-beast about to spring. With all his faults she could not help pitying Vincent at that moment.

That night she sang with a power and sweetness that eclipsed her performance at Blackpool—at any rate in the opinion of Peter Warner, who, by favour of the house manager of the Connaught, had been admitted free to the back of the stalls. He could guess the cause of her exultation, and shared it, though he hoped the day was now at hand when she would be free from surroundings like those in which she was now condemned to work.

The Conn, as its habitués called it with an affection hard to understand, was one of the oldest of the minor theatres of North London, having started as a "barn" for singing and dancing in the days of William IV, and been rebuilt in the megalomaniac taste of the eighteen-seventies. With its gilding effaced by Time with grubby fingers, the now gaunt and draughty auditorium was a seraglio of chilling nudity, culminating in the two colossal female figures over the proscenium, the chipped nipples of whose heavy plaster breasts seemed to have reversed mythology and suckled wolves. Boredom and indifference brooded over the place from the men attendants in shabby uniforms to the rather dirty, badly-made-up little bobby-soxers, alert only for "dates," who listlessly proffered the programmes. The audience, scattered thinly over the Sahara of the stalls and circle, seemed just as bored, except when it made its own pleasure from amorous hand-clasps; and life only manifested itself—and then with unnecessary noise—from the long bar behind the stalls, whence the clinking of glasses, the drawing of corks, and loud laughter streamed out to do continuous battle with the unhappy artists.

Against this Gail Darien lifted up her voice on the dust-laden stage, beneath the faded red velvet of the proscenium draperies, youth in the tomb of dead merriment, ardour beating in vain upon the drab impassiveness of small-street respectability. And only Peter Warner, with parted lips and misty eyes, dreamed that anything out of the ordinary was glorifying the programme of the Conn to-night.

CHAPTER NINE

I

THE next day Peter lunched with his sister Beryl at a favourite restaurant of his, where the Italian proprietor had allowed a fellow-exile to pay for his meals by painting the walls into the likeness of a Neapolitan loggia—marble pillars, vine-covered trellis, and, beyond, the bay, with grey-blue Capri in the background, and Vesuvius dimming the pellucid sky beneath his smoke-plume. Peter adored the innocent theatricalism of the Amalfi. He always felt, as he sat at one of the tiny tables with their chequered cloths, and watched the glint of any sun-rays that might have penetrated the leaden sky above Soho reflected in the red or amber of the cheap Italian wines, that he was for a little while removed from the rush and scowl of London. He liked, also, the Italian cooking, especially the variety of the *hors d'œuvre* and the delicious combinations of eggs and mayonnaise.

He was feeling particularly good to-day, believing that he had advanced Gail Darien's future by a long stride. He had also spent a happy morning sketching out scenes and noting fragments of melody that had sprung up in his mind for that modern opera, revue, or what-not that Wally Montrose had suggested to him at Blackpool.

He was in consequence a little late at the Amalfi, and to make amends to Beryl for keeping her waiting, he ordered a bottle of *Lacrima Christi*, a wine he knew she liked. She also seemed to be in a cheerful mood. Her eyes sparkled, her dark curls had been most carefully set, and the red feather in her black hat, picking up the red threads in the jumper under her coat, was a master-stroke. Everybody looked up as they passed through the room to their table; and she was not to know that Peter, as he walked behind her, was thinking, "What a sensation there would be if I were bringing in Gail Darien now!" He could be damnably fraternal sometimes!

But they thoroughly enjoyed their lunch. Beryl had a quantity of anecdotes about the cast of *I Like You, Lady!*, and about their new conductor, Les Linacre, which were far richer than anything the comics would be allowed to utter on the stage. No rumour seemed to have reached her that Lillian Green was out and an unknown about to replace her, and Peter felt that Monty would wish him to keep silence. . . . Besides, dear Beryl, though, as she truly professed, no addict of back-stage gossip, was not always discreet when her cynical humour was aroused.

At the coffee stage, however, she herself drew away from the topic by fishing up from the floor the large, rather untidy handbag she always carried, crammed with odds and ends, letters, and scraps of

paper. "Hope I haven't lost them," she said, feeling in the bag. "I'm always dropping things out of here. . . . No, here they are!" and she extracted some crumpled sheets of music, written and overwritten in Peter's large, decorative hand. They were the two songs, "Nell's Prayer" and "Rushing River!" which were all that he had hitherto completed of the score of *Orange Nell*.

"Oh! I'm glad you brought those back!" he said. "I was going to ask you for them. What do you think of them?"

"Best thing you've done yet—if you ask me," replied Beryl.

"You don't think that sort of stuff old-fashioned, then?" he asked.

"What's old or new fashion to do with it? There's good music and bad music, that's all. And this is good . . . first time, perhaps, one could say that honestly about any stuff of yours!"

"I say—*Beryl*!" She was never lavish with her approval.

"I mean it." She leaned over the table as he smoothed out the creased sheets. "I've dared to offer one or two suggestions—here . . . and here." She pointed.

"Yes—yes, I see!" He studied them for a moment with whistling movements of his lips. "These are absolutely right!" he declared, looking up at her. "Why on earth didn't I see it myself?"

"Because you know damn-all about harmony, my lad!" she retorted, sending two slight spirals of cigarette smoke through her curved nostrils.

"Worse luck!" confessed Peter. "That's what comes of being deprived of a proper musical education. . . . Waiter, two anisettes! . . ." He felt in his pockets.

"What are you looking for now?" asked Beryl. "No pen? . . . Or pencil? . . . You're one hell of a journalist, aren't you?"

"I know I am," he confessed. "Lend me your pen, Ber! I'd like to ink your corrections in. . . . I say, what splendour!"

He wished he had bitten his tongue off as soon as he had spoken, for he realized that this glittering toy, in some sort of semi-precious stone, must be somebody's expensive gift . . . and he did not need to be told whose.

"Don't gawp at it!" said Beryl harshly. "Just take this down, if you know how to! In that song, 'Rushing River!' . . . why call the Thames 'rushing,' by the way?"

"Old London Bridge . . . the rapids through the arches, you know."

"Historical, aren't we? Well, when you come to orchestrate, what about bringing in harp *glissandi* here," she pointed again with her beautiful, nervous forefinger, "and the same when the theme recurs? Gives it an extra touch of romance, doesn't it? which I suppose is what is needed in this type of stuff."

"Yes! Oh yes!" cried Peter enthusiastically, dabbing at the score

with the fountain-pen and scattering cigarette ash over the pretty table-cloth under the frown of the proprietor's wife at her counter nearby. "I say, you're as sharp as a needle, aren't you, Beryl?"

"I haven't played the harp all these years," she answered, "without learning where it should come in and where it shouldn't. . . . Why don't you show your opera to Grigori?"

"Well," replied Peter, still busy with the pen, "it's not ready yet to show to anybody. I've hardly begun upon it. In any case, I'm about to go under contract with the Melodeon people. I was going to tell you."

"With Melodeon?" She lifted her eyebrows. "I should have thought you could have got in with a more solid firm than that."

"The salary's solid enough, as you'll realize by our style next time I take you out."

"Well, I hope it means you'll move from that shack of yours out at Fulham, at last."

"I hope so, too. All in good time!"

"Anyway, I don't see how your contract prevents me from showing the rough score to Mr Zharkov. You couldn't do better with it."

"Thanks very much," answered Peter woodenly. "If it is decided some day to offer the piece to Fizz, I'd prefer it to be done through the usual channels."

"Oh, don't be so stupid!" exclaimed Beryl with an impatient jerk of her head. "You know how much attention things sent 'through the usual channels' get from Fizz! They're packed up and sent to this 'adviser' and that, to be yawned over and smothered in cigar-ash. Till at last they're buried in All-Star House."

"Aren't you forgetting my pal, Monty Du Parc?"

"Monty Du Parc, indeed! Is *he* a director?"

"Might be worth any two of 'em on my side, all the same."

"Stop being childish, do, Peter! What you want is to get Grigori interested in this as a musician, not merely as a man of business. You want your score kept constantly before him by somebody who's always seeing him and whom he listens to."

"Meaning yourself? I'd rather throw *Orange Nell*, score and libretto, into the fire than hear you say that, Ber!"

"Look!" Beryl laid her elbows on the table, and her lips drew out into the thin, ugly line that Peter hated to see. "We'd better get this straight once and for all. Whether you like Mr Zharkov or not, he and I are going to be married some day."

"Married? Have you gone clean dippy? Why, how many wives d'you suppose he's got already?"

"I know how many. One!"

"Ah!"

"Whom he's divorcing for desertion as soon as she can be found to have the papers served on her. We know where she is . . . in

Poland somewhere . . . or Russia. . . . A dreadful creature! And in the meantime——”

“In the meantime you’re being led up the garden-path by brooches and . . . and . . . fountain-pens! My God, Beryl! A girl of your intelligence!”

“You’re quite mistaken. . . . And don’t shout, please; everybody’s looking round at us! I would never let Zharkov give me a present that cost real money until our wedding-day. . . . And the other thing you’re thinking isn’t true either. Grigori’s tired of loose adventures, and needs somebody to give him peace.”

Peter tried hard, but for the life of him he could not have kept the smile he was trying to hide behind his hand from spreading over his face. “Really, Beryl,” he murmured, “do you think *peace* is what you would bring to any man?”

She made a grimace at him; then flashed into one of her charming smiles. “Not boredom, not stagnation . . . if that’s what you mean! No, we shan’t grow into a fireside couple—we’re neither of us bourgeois enough for that! But I believe I can calm his restlessness, and keep him up to the mark he should aim at as a musician. I want to help him realize the other talents he has besides money-making. He’s done enough of that by now, I should think. I never flatter him, just as I never flatter you. But I’ve seen work of his that any composer might be proud of.”

Peter was on the point of saying, “Some composer doubtless was,” but contented himself with a shrug and a puff of smoke. .

“I must go,” said Beryl abruptly, collecting her things. This was nearly always her mode of departure, sudden, uncompromising, on occasions it might almost be called impolite. It was a habit that dated from long before the days when the star of Grigori Zharkov had risen on her horizon, and Peter had given up asking her where she was off to, because she never would reply. So now he merely nodded. “All right; I’ll finish my coffee and pay the bill. I’ll copy ‘Rushing River!’ again and send it you to try over. So long, old girl . . . and don’t do anything you’ll be sorry for!”

He watched her pass down the restaurant with her quick, imperious walk before which waiters and others readily made way. She always looked, Peter thought, as though she knew exactly where she was going, and what she meant to do when she got there. She had the alert, challenging step of some warrior maiden . . . hardly of a Joan of Arc, for Peter could not imagine Beryl hearing heavenly voices, or believing them if she did, but, rather, of a Valkyrie, prompt to beat down the smallest opposition or disrespect. . . . How different she was in this from Gail Darien, with her serene indifference to the world about her! What Gail would do the day somebody planted himself firmly across her path was the point on which Peter could not make up his mind.

He sat brooding on this and his music until the proprietor himself apologetically put a plate with the bill on it before him, and he came back to his surroundings to find that the cloths were already being stripped from the other tables, revealing their green-baize tops. "Oh no, Mr Warner! You don't have to apologize!" laughed the round, black-haired Italian. "Only, you see, the waiters they like to get off for their afternoon break!"

At her counter the handsome proprietress regarded Peter with an unsmiling face, and he felt terribly rebuked.

II

Behind the locked doors of the Stadion Theatre in Leicester Square the last stages of rehearsal for the London opening of *I Like You, Lady!* were proceeding; and the whole building—the wide, golden-lighted stage, the grim-walled back-stage, the vast, dim vessel of the auditorium—was one scene of intense inactivity.

Upon the stage, set for Marguerite's Garden in Nuremberg, the carefully chosen chorus, in their ordinary clothes and with their individuality not yet smoothed to an identical formula by make-up and eyebrow-pencil, stood in rows, wrapped, it would seem, in buddhistic meditation. Round the wings the players of small parts knitted industriously; the orchestra sat silent in its pit, Beryl Warner, beside her harp, reading Dent's *Life of Mozart*; the conductor leant against the rail behind him, tapping his desk idly with his baton. In the background stage hands surveyed with the complacency of engineering experts a small practicable balcony they had succeeded in erecting, while from remoter recesses a hammer beat with an irregular rhythm.

Two of the minor principals in the revue sat in a stage box, looking at the scene for something to disapprove of. Through the stalls were scattered ghostly figures that neither stirred nor spoke, except for one group near the front, consisting of Monty Du Parc and Pallent, the stage-director, an elderly man with storm-beaten face and sucked-in cheeks, anchored to a large notebook. These muttered together, as they gazed at Gail Darien, seated in her street clothes on a stool in the centre of the stage with a mediæval spinning-wheel in front of her.

"I see," said Monty briskly. "I see the difficulty. What do *you* think, Pallent?"

"What do *you* think, Reggie?" called the stage-director to the stage-manager, who was standing near the footlights, in grey flannel trousers that seemed to be collapsing over his suède shoes, a yellow silk shirt, and a tie like a Japanese sunset.

Reggie was understood to mumble that, if Mr Du Parc felt that way about it, she could be moved to the right and the chorus grouped to face her, with the back rows on the steps.

"Try it that way!" decided Monty.

"Try it that way!" ordered Mr Pallent, and made a note in his book.

Reggie walked slowly to the centre of the stage and expounded these complications to Gail, who rose and moved to the right. Reggie studied her for a couple of minutes, scratching his chin; then with the same deliberation he picked up the spinning-wheel and carried it over to her. Upon that a young man in a sports jacket came alertly from the wings, seized her stool and bore it away out of sight. There was a faint clamour, and he was induced to restore it.

Reggie meanwhile had with thoughtful steps approached the chorus and herded them into a shapeless tangle on the left.

"I say, Reggie!" called Monty.

"Reggie!" shouted Mr Pallent.

"Yes, Mr Du Parc?"

"That won't do!"

Reggie paced the stage once more, and hove to at the footlights near where his superiors were seated.

"They won't do like that at all!" grumbled Monty, and "Not a bit like it!" declared Mr Pallent.

"They won't *be* like that, Mr Du Parc," explained Reggie. "They'll be on the rostrum steps, the back rows will."

"What steps? I don't see any steps!"

"Oh, there aren't any steps . . . *now*," said Reggie. "But there will be then. . . . Steps from the market-place, you know."

Monty and Mr Pallent looked at each other blankly, and the stage-director opened his notebook, stared at it, and shut it again.

"What's that, Les?" enquired Monty, for the conductor had turned round and called across to them. "What did you say?"

"I said I didn't like the contraltos being all bunched together up at the back like that. . . . They won't come through."

"Oh! . . . Well, what's *your* idea, Les?"

The musical-director shrugged his shoulders. "I liked them as they were before," he said.

"What about trying them again as they were before, Pallent?" enquired Monty, pulling at his moustaches.

"As they were before, Reggie!" ordered the stage-director.

Reggie turned about, slow-marched up the stage once more, and shepherded the chorus back to their old places. Then he stood with arms folded looking down the line, and taking No. 1 by the arm made her change places with No. 5. Satisfied, he returned leisurely to the conductor's desk.

As soon as his back was turned the young gentleman in the sports jacket re-emerged, and taking No. 5 by the hand led her back to exchange places with No. 1 again. All the exquisitely dressed heads in the front row bent forward and whispered to him.

"Wha'?", said the young man in the sports jacket.

One of the two girls in the stage box leaned out and spoke to him. "Wha'?" asked the young man, putting his hand to his ear.

A small-part woman at the side of the stage laid aside her knitting, wrapped it in a piece of brown paper, and saying to her next-door neighbour, "Take care of that for me, dear, will you?" went across to the young man and offered elucidations. "Wha'?" he said, and then, "Oh!"

A hollow voice spoke to him from the flies. "WHA-A-A-?" shouted the young man, looking upwards.

Monty turned from conference with Mr Pallent and rebuked him peevishly. In confusion he snatched a tall, richly carved Gothic window out of Marguerite's humble cottage and disappeared with it on his shoulder. . . .

"Yes!" said Monty at length in clear and confident tones. "Now, everybody! . . . What is the matter, Reggie?"

"That girl's in her wrong place."

"Oh, get it right, *please!*"

Reggie again transposed Nos. 1 and 5 and evaporated upstage.

"Now!" called Monty. "Those are your positions . . . keep them!"

"Let me take that down!" said Pallent, writing busily in his book.

"Are you ready?" enquired Monty. "Then we'll take the song again, Miss Darien!"

There was a movement of relief in the orchestra; Beryl laid aside her book and approached her sinewy fingers to the strings. Les tapped his desk as a signal; but at that instant the hammering, which had hitherto possessed something of the pathos of distance, as it might be a woodpecker in a forest, broke out close at hand with formidable resonance.

"Stop that hammering!" roared Monty.

"Stop it!" commanded Mr Pallent sternly. "Reggie, where are you?"

There was a pause; then the young man in the sports jacket thrust his head enquiringly round the corner of Marguerite's cottage. "That *hammering!*" shouted Monty, at top pitch of exasperation. The young man nodded understandingly and withdrew. There followed a lull in the knocking, which, however, broke out the next instant with redoubled fury. The nearest members of the chorus waved their hands and called hoarsely into the wings. After a few spasms, as though the invisible carpenter were being strangled, the hammering ceased.

"Now," said Monty with ferocious irony, "if everybody has *quite* finished interrupting, we'll take the song."

"I say, Monty!" called the conductor.

"Yes, Les?"

"This won't do as it is now! The audience can't see Marguerite at all. You've put the chorus all round her!"

"Ye-es," admitted Monty, wiping his glasses with a febrile hand; "it does look a bit ragged. How about it, Pallent?"

The stage-director sucked in his cheeks reflectively, but made no suggestion.

"I think, perhaps," hazarded Monty, "we might—oh! Get off!"

This last was to the young man in the sports jacket, who had thrown the chorus into confusion by ploughing through them with three stage-hands and the carpenter, his hammer in his apron-pocket, bearing a large rostrum.

"Wha'?" enquired the young man.

"Take that blasted thing away!"

"Right away!" emphasised Mr Pallent. "I said, *right* away, Hughie!"

The young man looked bitterly disappointed, and piloted his assistants straight into the doorway of Marguerite's home, where the rostrum stuck fast. They began to dismantle the cottage.

"Well, what are you going to do about Marguerite, Monty?" demanded Les, tapping his desk impatiently and looking at his watch. "Time's getting on, you know!"

Monty wiped his brow. "Where is Reggie?" he wailed. "REGGIE!" bellowed Mr Pallent, and a succession of voices took up the cry, "Reggie! . . . Reggie!" which died away in plaintive echoes, as it were among remote crags and peaks.

Meanwhile the young man in the sports jacket was gesticulating in the midst of a group of chorus-girls and a gathering assemblage of advisers from the ranks of the small-part girls. "Have you quite done over there?" enquired Monty with a murderous inflexion.

"Please, Mr Du Parc," called a girl's voice, "he wants to know where he's to put the rostrum."

Les Linacre gave a wink at his drummer, who responded with a single crisp note on the fixed cymbal. Les tapped reprovingly as the rest of the band rippled with laughter. "Are you ready to start, Monty?" he enquired.

"How can I start," screamed Monty, "when that girl keeps huddling away at the back there? Marguerite! Marguerite!" He ran furiously up the wooden steps laid over the orchestra on to the stage.

"Oh, would it be me?" asked Gail, forcing her way to the front through the obstructing groups.

"Don't talk! *Sing!*" snapped Monty. "What are you looking for?"

"My spinning-wheel!" answered Gail. . . .

It was found at last. "Now!" said Monty. "Start your song! Off you go!" He raised his arm with a commanding gesture, to be met by a dead silence. "What the ——?" Monty swung round. "What's happened to the band?"

"They've gone," Mr Pallent called up from the stalls.

"Gone? I never gave them leave!"

"It's their lunch-hour all right," answered Mr Pallent, consulting his watch.

"Oh, well! Break for half an hour only!" said Monty sulkily. "Everybody back at two!"

"Everybody at two!" vociferated Mr Pallent, stowing his notebook in the prompt corner with alacrity.

III

Monty, left to himself, took a worried turn or two on the stage. "Well," said a voice behind him. "How are you getting on with your new job? You like it—no?"

He turned and met the malicious smile of Zharkov. "It's shocking," he said. "I'll sort things out here before I've done! Not a soul in this theatre who knows his job! They can't solve the simplest problem, and I have to do everything—simply everything!"

"Just what you wanted, wasn't it?" asked Zharkov mockingly.

"That's absurd!" answered Monty. "I'm beginning to be sorry now I ever tried to help you people out of your mess!"

"How did Inman take it?" enquired Zharkov.

Monty's face lightened. "There was a grand row," he murmured. "He said if they put Lillian out he'd boycott the show, and he didn't care what they did to him. Forshaw reminded him that he would be breaking his contract as producer-director for Fizz if he walked out, and begged him just to hear Miss Darien sing."

"Which he wouldn't, of course?"

"No. He said he'd see us all in hell first, and we should hear from his solicitors. . . . We haven't; and since Tuesday it's all fallen on me."

"It's Friday already," remarked Zharkov with a sour grimace, "and we open on Monday. Do you think you can do it?"

"Of course!" declared Monty breezily. "And all the better without Inman!"

"You think so?" asked Zharkov in an unencouraging voice. "Well, I wish you luck, Monty!"

"Stay and see how we get on, won't you?"

"Not to-day. I have an appointment."

"But look here, old man, I wanted your advice!"

"Oh no! I am sure you will do better by yourself, Monty! *You* have the ideas, you know!" And with a sarcastic smile Zharkov melted into the shadow of the wings.

Just before he disappeared, however, he paused by the corner of the orchestra pit and made an almost imperceptible movement of his eyebrow. Upon that, Beryl Warner, who had not gone out with the rest of the band, but remained rubbing blue pencil on her strings, rose, lifted the green baize over her harp, put on her jacket and her knitted cap, arranging her curls gracefully under it, and slipped out.

At the expiry of what was nearer an hour than the half-hour Monty had conceded, the congregation had filtered into the theatre again. The unexplained ghosts had drifted back into the gloom of the stalls. The battens and the glow-worm lights of the orchestra had been switched on once more, and the band were in their places . . . Beryl coming swiftly in a minute or two after the others, her face a little flushed. The chorus were on the stage and Marguerite waiting at her spinning-wheel. Everything was ready—even the hammering had recommenced in the distance.

"There!" said Monty complacently as he surveyed the effective grouping which the chorus (free from his or Pallent's or Reggie's interference) had assumed by the light of their own experience; "it's quite simple the way I said, Pallent! Come on now! Don't let the grass grow!"

Gail sang Marguerite's song, sang it with the power of energies at last released. Les Linacre nodded approvingly, but wanted the chorus to sing the refrain again. They had just begun when, from the back of the stalls, a voice well known and dreaded pierced through the crystalline notes of the sopranos. "Stop!" it commanded.

Monty sprang up from his place in the stalls and whipped round with a fallen jaw. Over everybody on the stage passed a tautness, as when the Sergeant-Major comes on parade.

Down the centre gangway of the stalls came slowly a powerful-looking man, with a pale face and a square jaw, his hat on his head, and his hands in the pockets of his dark overcoat. Amid a dead silence he advanced to the orchestra rails. Les Linacre, turning in his place, smiled in greeting—he was the only person present too important to be frightened—but he said nothing.

Arthur Inman beckoned to Gail. "Come here, Miss . . . er!" he ordered.

Gail rose from her stool, and approached the footlights, looking scared.

"What's your name?" asked Inman.

"Gail Darien, Mr Inman," she answered, succeeding in keeping the tremor out of her voice.

"And where did you learn singing?"

"With Bernard Middlemast, Mr Inman," she answered.

"He taught you extremely well, then!" Inman's grim face bent, it could scarcely be said to relax, into a smile. "He made you sing your words distinctly, too, didn't he? If I could get these others—" He made a gesture with his fist like a blow. "Well, that was very good, Miss Darien . . . but I'm going to show you some business for this song that'll double the effect. . . . Reggie!"

"Yes, Chief!" Nobody had seen Reggie arrive at the footlights, so swift had been his transit.

"Put that spinning-wheel in the centre! . . . What was the big idea,

Pallent, of shoving the girl away in the corner there, where half the house can't see or hear her?"

"It was Mr Du Parc's idea, Chief!" mumbled the stage-director, scribbling furiously in his notebook.

"Oh?" said Inman, and for the first time glanced at Monty, who was standing up awkwardly in his seat in the stalls. Then, without a word, he swung round and addressed the chorus. "And why aren't you as I placed you at Blackpool?" he demanded.

There was a scurry and flutter like a flock of frightened birds, and the chorus straightened out again in quite a different arrangement.

"That's a little more like it!" said Inman, glancing along the lines. "Now, Miss Darien, that song once more!"

But this was more than Monty felt he could stand if he was ever in the future to call himself a man again. He came down the gangway to the producer. "Are you staying, then, Mr Inman?" he enquired.

"Yes, Monty, I am. Anything strange about that? This is my job, I believe?"

"But you decided—we thought——"

"Don't think so much, Monty! . . . You worry, you know! It's making you thin on top!" Monty could not resist passing his ringed hand uneasily over the thick blue-black hair at the back of his head.

"Yes," said Inman. "Some day it'll get you down completely. Go home and take an aspirin!"

"You can't do this, Inman!" said Monty in a low voice, his eyes narrowing behind his horn-rim glasses in a way that Peter had never seem them do.

"Can you? . . . I mean, you seemed to be making a pretty botch of it when I came in."

"I don't agree, and anyway, that's not the point. The point is that it was distinctly understood——"

"Understood? Who by?"

"The—the Board!"

"The Board hasn't met. . . . Look, Monty, you really do need a rest! Please go home and lie down! I'm taking over here. Excuse me a minute!"

He walked to the front of the stalls and called to the scattered figures in the seats. "I don't know who you all are, I'm afraid. But all those among you who have parts please go round behind and be ready for your entrances. I'm not used to be kept waiting. If there is anyone in the theatre *not* connected with the production, I must ask him to leave. I don't allow strangers at my rehearsals."

There was a shuffle, and a movement in two directions among the wraiths. Then Inman turned round and stared at his supplanter. "You heard, Monty," he said. "You've nothing to do here, either."

Monty, who had recovered himself a little, shook his head with

what he hoped was a crushing smile. "That doesn't go for me, Inman!" he retorted. "Mr Forshaw himself instructed me to——"

"Even Forshaw doesn't come to my rehearsals uninvited," answered Inman. "When you've gone, we'll begin."

"I'm not moving an inch, and I'll thank you to leave *my* rehearsals," was Monty's reply. . . . But Inman did not hear it. Monty only delivered it mentally as he walked away.

Back-stage he was pounced upon by the young gentleman in the sports jacket. "Mr Du Parc," he wailed, "where *shall* I put the rostrum?"

"On your face!" replied Monty. "It'll improve it!"

"*Wha'?*" said the young man, and perplexedly consulted his scene-plot.

IV

Monty, on leaving the theatre, returned on foot to the Fizz offices. His mood was so plain upon his face that one or two acquaintances he met on the way thought better of accosting him. In the entry to All-Star House he rated the lift-man for keeping him waiting, and on reaching his own room flung his hat and coat with violence on to a chair.

The door from the inner room opened, and Miss Serle appeared. "Mr Vincent Gynn's in the office, Mr Du Parc," she said.

"So what?" he grunted, stooping to unlock the drawer in his desk where he kept the cigars. "Am I expected to turn out the guard?"

The secretary, used to these manifestations, continued calmly, "He's in Miss Debenham's department just now, seeing about those costumes he's buying. But he said if you came in he would like to see you."

"Well, don't let him know I've come in. I can't see anybody at present."

The secretary withdrew, and Monty clipped off the end of a cigar and lit it. Then, sitting back in the arm-chair behind the wide, empty desk, he meditated. After awhile he rose and gracefully paced the room. From time to time he smoothed out the little tufts of his moustaches, and gradually the frown cleared from his forehead, the strain went from his lips, and at length, smiling at himself in the mirror, he wetted his little finger and stroked his right eyebrow, which was apt to ruffle at the corner. Then he took a fresh cigar from the box still lying on the desk, and pressed the bell.

"Miss Serle," he said, as the secretary appeared. "Is old Vincent still in the office, d'you know?"

"I'm not sure, Mr Du Parc. I'll ring round and find out."

"Please, and if you catch him say I'd be glad to see him a moment. I don't like to hurt the old has-been's feelings."

As Miss Serle went out, Monty beamed benevolently round the

room, until, his eyes falling on the cigar-box, he replaced it swiftly in the drawer and locked it.

It was nearly six o'clock before Inman dismissed the rehearsal, ordering everybody back again at 10.30 to-morrow.

"Everybody at half-past ten to-morrow—sharp!" called Mr Pallent.

"Everybody at half-past ten!" echoed Reggie.

"Wha'?" called a voice in the background, and twenty voices repeated, "Everybody at half-past ten!"

It had been a long and fatiguing rehearsal, yet even the band had not stirred from their places, and a great deal of work had been got through without delay or hesitation. It had not escaped general notice that, though Gail came in for one or two rasps from the producer's tongue, Inman was on the whole pleased with the new-comer, who had been originally foisted on him against his will. Whence a general feeling that Gail was a nice girl who ought to be made welcome, and a more restricted sentiment—confined, in fact, to three or four very important ladies—that she was a "go-getter," and had known very cleverly how to poke herself in—"Pity *we* never learnt that when we were starting, my dear!"

Gail herself was rapidly collecting her bag and scarf and music before rushing to find a taxi that would take her at top speed up to the Connaught for the first show, when she was addressed by a tall girl with dark curls under a red knitted cap. "How do you do?" she drawled. "I'm Beryl Warner, Peter's sister. He was telling me about you last night. Quite a mystery he's made of it!"

"Pleased to meet you." Gail shook hands.

"I'm glad you're going to be with us," continued Beryl. "You made a good beginning with Inman, I could tell that."

"You think so, really?"

"Sure of it. You're evidently one of the lucky ones. . . . Care for a cup of tea?"

"I'm dying for one, but I can't. I must gallop off to Highgate. I'm on there at six-forty, you know!"

"Poor you!" laughed Beryl, and let her go.

To Inman, a little later, as he stood in the prompt corner studying a lighting plot, a voice at his back said, "Well, Arthur, and how dost like her?"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Inman, glancing over his shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me, Bob, that this girl was remarkable?"

"I did a dozen times! But you wouldn't listen!"

Inman smiled reluctantly. "You get up my nose sometimes, Bob."

"Ee, I'm reet sorry for that, Arthur! . . . But will she do?"

"I've no choice, have I?"

"Nay, if you don't like her now you've heard her——"

"I tell you she'll have to do!"

"Happen we could dig out old Marquita?" Forshaw's eyes twinkled behind his heavy glasses.

"I'd as soon keep the theatre dark!"

"Nay, but I'm noan so sure! This Gail Darien's nobbut a small-time provincial singer——"

"Bob, do you set yourself up as a judge of sopranos . . . in any relation but one?"

"E-eh, but I'm shocked at you, Arthur, I am an' all!" Bob's eyes were fairly dancing. "Reckon, then, I must give way to you, over this girl!"

"I'll have no one else, that's flat. . . . If you bring anyone else in, I walk out!"

"Just as you wish, Arthur. What you say goes."

"I should think so! I've had trouble enough over this business. . . . Don't go away, Bob! I've been thinking. This girl's a very good voice, so why don't we bring her forward more? We can't possibly produce by Monday, as it is; so why not postpone one more week and bring her out in an Alaskan snow scene? It's just occurred to me. She'd look well in white furs."

"A new scene, Arthur?"

"Why not? With trappers, and a pack of huskies. We could get 'em from Tylman's, the animal people. What do you think?"

"A mucky fine idea—if you ask me! Have pity on t'ballet, if they coom on wi' their twirls an' all after those dogs!"

"You always have to make difficulties, don't you?"

"But, A-a-arthur, the expense!"

"Why spoil the show for the sake of a few pounds? It's in the West End we're opening, not in Bolton!"

"There's no taimel!"

"There's always time for what must be done! When you get a find like Gail Darien——"

"Ee, I wish I hadna coom here at all this afternoon! . . . Arthur, lad, art goin' clean daft over this girl?"

"Oh, clear off, Bob, and leave me to it! . . . We could introduce skaters, too!"

"And real ice floor, I suppose?"

"Do clear out; you're not a bit helpful! . . . Oh, by the way, Bob, what was that fellow Monty Du Parc doing to-day, interfering with my rehearsals?"

"Monty Du Parc? . . . I never told him to! I'll see he doesn't do it any more! Ee, Arthur, I'm reet glad it's all friendly like between us again. . . . We conna do wi'out thee, lad! . . . But, Arthur, I conna afford those blasted dogs! Winnot the lass be joost as effective if she sings solo?"

V

Arrived at the Conn, Gail had just time to dab on her make-up and hurl herself into her costume for the opening, in which Vincent was now insisting that she and Derek should appear with the full company. Derek did not offer to help her, but he was in a bubbling good humour—not unconnected, perhaps, with the bottle of champagne on the dressing-table, which he had bought, he told her flatteringly, to celebrate her good fortune and “in anticipation of better days!”

“Don’t anticipate too fast!” she panted as she ran zipp dress-fasteners together. “Stulitzer hasn’t fixed my salary with Fizz yet, you know. . . . Give me a drop of that, you pig! I’m choking with thirst!”

He poured her out a glass and kissed her; then they both hurried to be on for the opening.

At the end of the First Part Gail was returning to her room when Jack Kelham called after her, “Gail, the old man wants you!”

“Now? . . . I must change first!” she answered.

“Be quick, then! He said, go at once to his room.”

“I wonder what he wants?” she thought as she slipped into the black evening dress with the silver girdle that she wore for her solo number, now moved to Part Two. “I hope it’s just my formal release that he wants to give me.”

On entering the manager’s room she found Vincent walking up and down with a severe expression, evidently waiting for her, while Wanda, seated before her mirror, was renewing her carmine cheeks for the second half of the show.

“Ah! Here you are at last!” said Mr Gynn. “Gail, what’s this I learnt to-day at All-Star House? . . . I simply couldn’t believe it when I was told . . . that you have been all this week rehearsing for a show of Fizz’s to open on Monday, being, as you well know, under contract to me?”

“But, Mr Gynn!” cried Gail, “you gave me leave!”

“I gave you leave to rehearse for another management! I’m sure I did no such thing! Are you mad?”

“But you did, Mr Gynn! You did! . . . Wanda, you were here; you heard him say so! . . . On Monday night! . . . Oh, you must remember!”

Wanda’s fat face in the mirror lit up with evil joy. “I remember no’ing!” she declared. “Not’ing! Don’t try to bring me in, Miss! Speak to Mr Gynn!”

“Oh!” wailed Gail. “I see! You’ve talked him over! . . . Oh, Wanda, you are a cruel woman!”

“Don’t dare to say such things about Mrs Gynn!” thundered the manager. “Explain yourself to *me*! What did you mean by doing such an impudent thing?”

"You said you'd let me go," raged Gail, trembling all over. "It's settled with Fizz, and you can't keep me now!"

"Oh! Can't I?" asked Vincent. "Would you like to take a look at your contract? I have it here."

"Curtain up!" said a voice outside the door.

"You . . . you couldn't do such a thing!" said Gail in a breaking voice. "Mr Gynn . . . Wanda! . . . You couldn't be so mean! . . . What have I ever done to you, Wanda?"

"Wanda has nothing whatever to do with it!" asserted Vincent. "It's just a question of plain honesty and standing by one's engagements! You will not go to Fizz while you are signed with me, Gail . . . and you will attend no more rehearsals at the Stadion!"

"I should t'ink not!" burst in Wanda. "*She* at de Stadion! . . . It is to laugh!"

"Take warning, Gail!" went on Vincent Gynn very seriously. "Give me your word, or to-morrow my solicitors issue a writ against Fizz!"

"They needn't!" said Gail despairingly. "I know you've got me, if you choose! . . . I'm just . . . unlucky . . . that's all."

"Come! Come!" Vincent switched over to his oily manner. "Don't take it so hard, Gail! We all have our disappointments. Believe me, I'd be the last man to stand in your way, if I didn't absolutely need you just at present. It's no use, this mad rush to get on . . . get on . . . at any cost! You'll only do yourself harm! Have a little patience, my dear, and see what *I'll* do for you!"

"Thank you for nothing, Mr Gynn!" flared Gail, and marched out of the room with head held high. In the passage, however, the moment she had shut the door, she fell into a flood of tears. It was perhaps those tears that prevented her at first from perceiving Bobo Baggailey, who had jumped away from the keyhole as the door opened.

"What's the matter, old girl?" she enquired, sidling back again towards Gail. "They been rowin' you? What a shame! You're not feelin' a bit well, dear, are you? I could tell it the way you've been off colour in your singin' lately! They ought to make allowances for you in the circls!"

Gail's blood boiled up. "You dirty little snooper!" she exclaimed, and slapped Bobo's cheek.

The soubrette gave a yelp like a stricken puppy, and then uplifted her voice. "You can't do this to me!" she yelled. "You——"

"Shut up, Bobo!" admonished Jack Kelham, rushing from the prompt corner. "The curtain's up! . . . Gail! What are you doing? . . . You're off!"

There was a momentary flurry, and then Miss Gail Darien, the Soul of Song, walked smiling through the drapes to announce to a listless audience her first number, "Joybells are Sounding!" Derek looked up at her from the piano for a moment, wondering why she had been late; then bent himself sombrely to his task of accompaniment.

CHAPTER TEN

I

FAR-REACHING were the consequences of Vincent Gynn's inexplicable last-minute change of mind.

For Fizz it meant nothing less than keeping the Stadion dark for another whole week, and (as their Chairman had foreboded) "digging out" old Marquita. Not that the veteran soprano needed to be "dug" out; she gushed forth ecstatically at the suggestion, having almost given up hope of ever again seeing "Stadion" or any similar emblazonment in place of the usual "p.a." on her card in the *Stage*. But alas! Marquita's come-back, when *I Like You, Lady!* at last opened, neither interested the Press nor excited the public. The next morning the Libraries were unprecedentedly coy for the day after a Fizz first night, and a rumour pervaded the town that (as Peter Warner had had an inkling) *I Like You, Lady!* was too like the last three Fizz musicals to repay a visit.

Vast extra sums were at once thrown in for advertising, and Monty Du Parc was summoned to do his stuff. Never did Press agent make nobler efforts than he did to save the show. Exalted personages were prevailed upon to pass through batteries of flashlights to see it, and Athelstan Rigglesworth induced to devote a special article to "Whirter and Carr, the Comics I Found." One of the show girls, who was being wooed by an American "drummer" in car fuels, found herself photographed as "Stage Bride of Illinois Millionaire." Another, who hated dogs, and was indeed rather afraid of them, discovered that her beloved peke, Jackie, had been lost; and after the chase had run through the papers for a week (almost outstripping Jane), had to submit to being photographed hugging the creature—a lucky dog, all the readers agreed. A ballet girl, who had been enough of a little fool to go skating during a week-end and sprain her ankle, instead of receiving the sack she deserved, was posed with a gracefully bandaged foot, looking wistfully at a clock, above the caption, "My friends are all dancing at the Stadion show!" A trifling taxi collision in which Marquita was involved became a drama of suspense—"Marquita Reappears at Stadion after Close Escape"—and a pretext was even found to get rid of the Polish dancer Varshevsky in order that a pretty Russian boy with a romantic biography might be built up in his place. Finally, it was discovered that all twelve of the front-line lovelies required to be injected against influenza germs in their shapely thighs, and they were shown in a line smilingly prepared for the ordeal.

But it was in vain. None of these balloons served to lift *I Like You*,

Lady! out of its slough of despond. The whisper went round that it would be impossible to prolong the run much after the Christmas holidays, and a hush fell upon All-Star House at the realization that the incredible had happened. An Arthur Inman show had flopped!

In this situation it will readily be understood that there was war in heaven, between the great gods of Fizz. The Chairman presented a lugubrious face to Inman, and Inman was not reticent on his conviction that the apple-cart had been upset by Forshaw when he started the trouble over Lillian Green, and the last hope of righting it lost when he was too mean to agree to the Alaskan Snow Scene with the huskies. By pantomime at any rate, and noises suggestive of a dental surgery, Mr Zaleski contrived to convey his apprehensions of an approaching bare-footed existence; and Board Meetings, which were wont to be largely taken up by Bob Forshaw's demonstrations to Zharkov (like him a passionate card-player) of the brilliant strokes he had made at bridge the night before, became quite unpleasant occasions. Bob not only resented Zaleski's grievances over *I Like You, Lady!* even when chanted; he was wild with him on another count. He had just discovered the reason why Fizz had for some time not been getting the dates or the terms they used to for their touring shows from Golden Palaces (that famous chain of Variety houses founded by the late Abraham Gold). It was because Zaleski had privately acquired the controlling interest in them, and was squeezing his partners like a grizzly bear.

The only point on which the four partners were united was in blaming Monty Du Parc. He had brought that girl in without taking the trouble first to find out whether she was free to take the part, and had put Fizz in a position altogether inconsistent with its dignity. Monty bowed meekly to this storm, and even went so far as to offer apologies to Inman for having seemed to "butt in" at his rehearsals. Such a thing he would never dream of doing, but he had been grossly misled about Inman's intentions by the Chairman. Whatever Inman's degree of belief in these protestations, he appeared to accept the olive-branch, and invited Monty to dinner at his sadly magnificent mansion in Cavendish Square.

There, over two of those cigars which could not be bought at any shop or hotel in London, he imparted to him in strictest confidence that he was sick of Fizz, and was thinking of going in with José Miramar and Jack Dunne, those well-known theatrical speculators, in a big way. There would be plenty of money behind the new syndicate—those names were guarantee enough, weren't they?—and if Monty wanted a job where he would really have scope and, within reason, name his own salary, he had only to say so. So long as he stuck to his own line there was nobody in England to touch him.

Monty confessed that he had never understood how an artist like Inman could put up with what he did from a mere cheap-jack like

Bob Forshaw. As for the proposed new syndicate, it sounded pretty good, if . . .

Thereupon Inman, under renewed pledges of secrecy, confided to him that the big card which the associates had up their sleeve was—nothing less than the probable acquisition of the lease of the Parthenope Theatre! At this even Monty stared. The Parthenope is the great classical edifice, adorned by its Regency rebuilders with that lovely façade of fluted pillars and wrought-iron lamps, which only the most careless eye can miss near the east end of the Strand, within sight of Waterloo Bridge. Every foot of it is steeped in history. It was the French Opera House in the eighteenth century, and later Vestris sang in it; T. P. Cooke, from across the bridges, sought to defy the patent-holders of Drury Lane and Covent Garden by playing the legitimate drama in it; and Queen Victoria attended Balzoni's Circus and Menagerie there! . . . But Inman had said "the Parthenope," surely, and now imprudently repeated it. "We shall get the lease!" he boasted, lit up by a second glass of his amazing liqueur brandy; "Wiltons, the provision people, don't know what to do with it any longer; there's still eighteen years to run; and when we do get the Parthenope, my boy, what has Fizz, for prestige, capacity, or stage-space, to compete with it?"

Monty agreed that it would be marvellous, if . . . and went home to digest the disclosure. But either Inman's associates proved too slow, or somebody must have blabbed; for at the first Fizz Board Meeting after Christmas, the Chairman made a sensation. After recommending with a sigh that the notices should be put up at the Stadion for the end of January, and the theatre sub-let to Isidore Raymond to produce his new musical (in which Fizz might take a share), he went on to announce, before Zaleski could form his lips into a wail, that Bob Forshaw, Ltd., had taken up a fourteen days' option with Wiltons on the lease of the Parthenope, and begged to offer it to Fizz—if they wanted it. His nose seemed to curl like a live lobster's claw under his convex glasses as he gazed triumphantly round the table after making his announcement.

Inman sat stunned at the explosion of this mine, which shattered all his plans, and did not even dare to dissent from his fellow-directors when they recorded their votes in favour of seizing this unique and splendid opportunity. But he cut Monty Du Parc dead when he crossed him in the ante-chamber to the Board Room, going out.

But, to return, it was not only upon the mighty; it was upon Peter Warner, too, that the news of Vincent Gynn's unexpected obduracy fell as a heavy stroke. As soon as he learnt it from a despairing note that Gail sent him from the Connaught on Saturday, before proceeding to pack for Preston, he got on to Monty Du Parc upon the telephone and poured forth his disappointment and indignation.

"I know, old lad, I know," replied Monty soothingly. "I feel every bit as badly about it as you can. But what could we do, once Vincent chose to stand on the letter of his contract? And there's no need for the little girl to commit suicide over it. You don't suppose we shall lose sight of her, do you?"

Peter could extract nothing more definite from him than that, and rang off peevishly, quite forgetting to tell his friend his own good news, which, indeed, had for the moment lost its savour for him. But his contract was expected to come from Melodeon that week, and very generous, it seemed to him, were the terms nice little Mr Harington had suggested. Peter was not only to receive his first quarter's salary in advance; the agreement, although October was nearly out, was to date as from the first of that month. In return Melodeon expected him to include "Ridin' on a Star!" in the work done for them—after all, he had admittedly composed it in October!

With the prospect of a cheque for £100 arriving within a day or two, Peter, who had never seen so much money in his life, was not inclined to cavil; and he would have been radiantly looking for rooms and staring into furniture shops, but for Vincent Gynn's drop of poison in his cup. . . . Beryl Warner, too, though she may not have fully realized it, felt the repercussions of the shock. Grigori Zharkov's artistic temperament was never more like sweet bells jangled out of tune than when he foresaw a heavy financial loss, and the water-logged condition of *I Like You, Lady!* as it became more and more apparent did nothing to smoothe the course of love.

II

Of all those who thus suffered through Mr Gynn's obstinacy, perhaps only Peter Warner gave a thought to the one most grievously stricken. Gail Darien thought the fag-end of that autumn the nearest approach to hell that even her far from velvet-carpeted life had yet shown her. As they trailed from Preston to Wigan, from Wigan to Sunderland, from Sunderland to Scunthorpe, Derek was sullen and sarcastic, Vincent Gynn and his wife continuously disagreeable, Bobo Baggageley an open enemy, the weather foul, the audiences uninterested, and the digs uniformly uncomfortable. Perhaps things were in reality no worse than normal; but the ray of hope that had flashed across it had been quenched.

At the beginning of December they left the red brick and coal-dust of the North for the shabbiness of Chatham, with its long, dreary main street, and desolate barn of a theatre. Here two incidents happened, neither of them calculated to bring Gail any cheer. The first was the effort she made, on Jack Kelham's earnest insistence, to become friends with Bobo again. Penetrating to the room where Bobo dressed,

and finding her alone, in a tattered cotton dressing-gown and black-silk stockings that showed a strip of bulging flesh between their tops and the lace edge of her cami-knickers, she invited her to join Derek and herself for a drink in the saloon of a neighbouring public-house.

"How extravagantly Ritzyl!" trilled Bobo. "So unfortunate I am unable to attend. I have to entertain six gentlemen who have come from London specially to hear me sing."

Gail, swallowing down her fury, made another attempt. "I like this new rouge of yours, Bobo," she said. "The colour suits you."

"Think so?" enquired Bobo critically, moving her head across the mirror. "Some of my friends say it makes me look haggard." She whirled round savagely in her chair. "S'pose that's why you want me to use it!" she snarled.

"You hopeless little nit-wit!" blazed Gail, and walked out slamming the door. The peace conference did not meet again.

The second incident which also happened in Chatham was more important. It was the receipt by Gail of a long letter from her agent in London, Joseph Stulitzer, informing her that Fizz were ready to offer her the leading part in a touring revue of theirs called *Spotlights* which was going out again (for the fourth or fifth time) in February. "Your contract with Mr Gynn will expire this month with the end of his tour," wrote the agent, "and on a long-term view I consider it would be in your interest to accept Fizz's proposal. It is true the salary proposed is not much higher than Mr Gynn is paying you, but (on a long-term view of your interests again) I do not think it would be good policy to ask for more. . . ."

Gail, with an angry exclamation, dashed the letter down upon the table of their dark sitting-room, in which Doré's "Day of Judgment" and "Destruction of Mankind by the Flood" glimmered haggardly one on either side of the black, carefully locked piano. "I should like to know whether that man is on my side or theirs?" she demanded.

"What does he say?" asked Derek, collaring the letter. "H'm. . . . It doesn't seem too bad to me."

"Derek! You think that's good enough for me *now* . . . that dreadful old show?"

"God gie us a gude conceit of ourselves!" he sneered.

"You weren't at that rehearsal at the Stadion!" she flamed. "I *know* Mr Inman wanted to keep me . . . and for the West End, too!"

Derek shrugged his shoulders. "What *you* think!" he muttered.

"I don't believe Peter would advise me to take it!" declared Gail.

"What the hell business is it of that lanky snooper's, anyway? You seem to have gone completely Ophelia over him of late! All I can say is, you'll be putting me in a pretty bad hole if you refuse this offer."

"Bad hole? How?"

"Well, I was so confident our affairs were taking a brighter turn in

October that I snatched at the opportunity to order a few things I desperately needed."

"Then you can just send them back again! We owe enough money already!"

"Can't send back things I've worn, can I? . . . Or countermand suits that will have been cut out for me by now!"

"Why on earth did you want to order more suits?"

"I ran into that chap from Birmingham, Harry Jacobs, the day you were up at Fizz's office. He's the only tailor who knows how to make for me . . . better than any Savile Row man! . . . And he'll wait for his money, thank God!"

"Wasn't your waiting-list long enough before?"

"Well, my dear girl, I didn't feel I could go about looking like a tramp when I was the husband of a West End star—as I thought."

"You didn't ask yourself how long it was since I'd had a new tailor-made, did you?"

"If it comes to that, we're both in the same box. Victims of a rotten, blood-sucking social system! Now in Russia——"

"Oh, pipe down on Russia, Derek! I'm sick of it! . . . Anyway, I'm not going into *Spotlights* to please Fizz or anybody else. It makes me livid to think of it!"

Derek shrugged. "I suppose we can always go to the workhouse," he said.

But that prospect was staved off, at any rate for the moment. In the middle of December Gail was asked to fill a sudden vacancy as Girl in the pantomime of *Dick Whittington* on the Regent Pier at Brighton, an offer made all the more attractive by the fact that, as she knew, Jack Kelham and Nita were playing there as well; and the very next post—it is the way luck has—brought Derek a letter from the experimental Eaton Theatre in St. John's Wood offering him a fortnight after Christmas in a play by a new Czech dramatist. After that nothing was spoken of but the Central European drama, and any mention of *Dick Whittington* was frowned down as flippant.

III

That pantomime, successfully produced on Boxing Day, when devoted crowds came ready to brave rain, snow, or squalls in the long trek to the seaward end of the pier, had been running two out of its three weeks when Jack and Nita sat one morning at breakfast in the lodgings they were sharing with Gail in a street of small Regency houses up by St. Nicholas' Church. They were unperturbed—as befits those whose livelihood is to be looked at—by the scores of theatrical photographs that smiled at them from the mantel-piece, from between the tarnished gilt pillars of the funereal sideboard, from the marble-

topped table that blocked the bay-window and aided the barbed entanglement of cactus plants along the sill to prevent the sash from ever being lifted, and from the summit of the velvet-lined mock satin-wood cabinet in the corner.

The shelves of this piece of furniture were crammed with such objects of art as Dresden shepherdesses melting ectoplasmically into their supporting stiles, china shoes that made the feet ache to look at them, a pair of jack-booted, porcelain highwaymen toasting their villainies across a doll's table, elephants in black wood, a Chinese mandarin decapitated in some far-off historic tragedy, pin-boxes with views of waterfalls and swan-drawn coracles upon their lids, and cloisonné vases apparently fashioned by rolling them upon the pebbles of Brighton beach. Authentic local colour was supplied by a pair of ancient shells on the mantel-piece, their convolutions streaked by the grime of years, and a garishly coloured print of the Royal Pavilion in the 1830's, which clashed violently with the modernity of the cheap chromium photograph frames and the high-backed chairs of pale wood against the walls.

To all this historical and social medley the Kelhams (subconsciously aware, it may be, of their own eternity) paid not the least attention, but sat, Nita studying the *Daily Mirror*, and Jack, in his dressing-gown, the gossip column of a local paper.

"Did Gail tell you her news last night?" asked Nita at length, laying down her paper to pour coffee from a Grecian urn.

"What's that, dear?" murmured Jack, still reading. "Can you tell me," he burst out, "why nobody but Mavis" (this was the Principal Boy with a share in the show) "is to get any publicity in this town?"

"Because other people are asleep, I suppose," returned Nita. "But who reads that stuff? . . . Pass it over, will you?" Jack handed it across, and fell to upon his pallid egg and streaky curl of bacon. "What did you say about Gail?" he asked after a minute.

"She tells me Peter Warner's coming down to Brighton this week for a day or two."

"That doesn't surprise me," answered Jack, making desperate excavations in the slag of the mustard-pot. "I told him when I saw him in London that ours would be the best panto on the South Coast."

"And so you think, do you, my beautiful innocent, that he's come all the way to Brighton to see *Dick Whittington* on the Regent Pier?"

"Why shouldn't he? Even if we haven't the comforts of the Palace or West Piers?"

"Well . . . maybe he'll honour us by looking in for a few minutes to hear his Gail sing——"

"Where is she, by the way?" asked Jack, looking towards her empty chair.

"Had her breakfast early . . . she never eats more than a piece of toast . . . and went out riding on the Downs."

"In this cold?" Jack shuddered and drew his thick dressing-gown with the tartan cuffs closer round him. The sky through the windows was grey; a cutting North wind blew down the road past St. Nicholas'; and the sea, could it have been viewed from their room, would have shown itself yellow, restless, and snarling with white foam. "Marvellous energy!" said Jack wonderingly, as he tapped a cigarette on the back of his hand. "Still, she doesn't have to exert herself as 'Alice'! Only two songs."

"And one of them will be cut . . . or transferred . . . if she goes on getting encored for it, like last night."

Jack grinned. "Yes. I could see Mavis was mad."

"I think Mavis is as noxious as Wanda Gynn under her sugarness."

"That reminds me," said Jack seriously. "We must make up our minds whether we're going out with Vincent Gynn again when this panto ends."

"You'll go over my dead body, if you do! How could you dream of it, Jack?"

"Well," Jack looked ponderously sagacious. "It's a safe twelve weeks, you know."

"Nothing's safe with Vincent Gynn . . . not even your salary when it's in your pocket!"

"It'll be quite safe this time. I happen to know his friend in London has definitely come in, and he's got some fine dates. Golden Palaces in three towns!"

"Jack! Vincent never got a date with Golden Palaces, even the smallest of 'em, in his life! And I don't believe in the 'friend in London.' It's a gag."

"Well, I'm only telling you what he told me. Of course, it doesn't take me in—not a word of it."

"Then why say you think of going back to him?"

"Well, I believe Gail and Derek mean to."

"After all they said when the last tour ended? They had a frightful row with him; everybody in the theatre heard them!"

"These things blow over," remarked Jack, with the philosophy of experience.

"But would Derek condescend to go back into the provinces now he's a 'West End actor'?" asked Nita with an edge to her voice.

"You can't call the Eaton a West End theatre."

"Shows often go to the West End after their fortnight there."

"I'll be surprised if the one Derek's in does. It's amazing stuff, I'm told. By a Czech called Zkramm—the leader of the Nudist theatre."

"What?" Nita's eyes goggled. "Derek in strip-tease! I just can't see him!"

"Nobody sees him—in that way! You've got it wrong. Nudism means bareness—"

"You don't have to tell me that!"

"Listen! It means no plot, no ideas, no music—except an air-raid siren and an electric saw—practically no dialogue, and what there is as far as possible in words of one syllable, no scenery, no lighting, no make-up, no costumes. All the characters wear black boiler-suits, with badges like the swastika, the Hammer and Sickle, the—er—the Fascist Firewood and Chopper and so on. . . . It tells you who to applaud and who to boo without waiting, as soon as they come on. Derek swears it's incredibly impressive. It's called Nudist drama because it's stark——"

"Staring, I should say! What's come over Derek? Has he gone mental?"

"I'd call it mental to let an attractive girl like Gail go off on her own when you were married to her. I'd stop *you* doing it."

"That's what you think! But Peter certainly is making a fool of himself about that girl. You saw the enormous bouquet he sent her on Boxing Day. Everybody was making remarks about it, and Mavis didn't like it a bit."

"So what? Nobody knew who sent it."

"Well, all I can say is, if old Pete can throw his money about like that, he must be doing well these days."

"Not so well as you think, perhaps," hinted Jack mysteriously.

"What do you mean, Jack? That song of his, 'Ridin' on a Star!' is all over the place. I've heard it myself on the wireless twice lately, and Lyon and Hall's window is full of copies. It's one of the hits of the year. . . . Odd it isn't in our show!"

"It isn't in a good many pantomimes. . . . And, further, what may not be generally known, several bands won't touch it, or his other song, 'Dreaming I Waltz with You!'"

"Why not? They're good, catchy tunes!"

"What on earth's that got to do with it? Take our Head Office, for instance. Our people are very close with Percy Peel, and the last thing they want to do is to annoy them. Now Percy Peel have got their knife into poor old Peter; they say he pulled a fast one on 'em . . . and that's the way it goes!"

"I'm sure Peter would never do anything tricky. But anyhow, he must be making quite a nice pile out of those two songs as it is, Jack!"

"I don't believe he is. I understand he has an all-in contract with Melodeon that doesn't give him much more than a living. If he'd asked my advice before he signed——"

"He'd probably be even worse off than he is. . . . But anyhow, he's being obvious about Gail, and Derek's not the sort of chap to stand for it."

"I've no sympathy with Derek," declared Jack. "The way he behaves to Gail he asks for it."

"If every husband got what he asked for——" said Nita severely. "Personally, I hope Gail won't do anything silly."

"Didn't she do that the day she married Derek?"

"It's too late for her to think about that now. They were just two kids, anyway . . . and most likely madly in love. She'll be wise to make the best of it now. Matter of fact, I believe she still loves Derek—in a sort of a way."

"I can tell you she's pretty sore just at present over some nonsense there's been with a Russian girl at the Eaton, and also at the way he crowds over her because he's got a London engagement and she hasn't."

"Look out!" warned Nita, glancing through the window. "Here she comes!"

IV

The wooden gate of the little front garden clicked, and Gail ran up the path, clapping her gloved hands together against the cold. As she closed the house-door behind her, Jack called, "Nice steeplechase, Gail?"

"I'm fr-r-r-ozen!" she answered, putting her head into the sitting-room. "I must have been crazy to ride on a day like this! I galloped all I could without tiring the poor horse out, but still my toes are like ice!"

"Have a cup of coffee," invited Nita, pouring out.

"God bless you, Nita!" replied Gail, and, taking the cup of scalding coffee, put it down for a moment between the pink shells on the mantel-piece, while she removed her beret, shook out her hair, and lifted one slim, arched foot in its strapped jodhpur boot to the fire.

"Chilblains!" cautioned Jack, lighting a cigarette, and then, "Going to take Peter out scampering on horseback when he arrives?" he enquired, offering the packet to Gail.

"I don't suppose Peter rides," said Nita shortly.

"Oh yes, he does!" replied her husband. "He's often told me how he learned—in the cavalry school at Knightsbridge. His brother, who was a bandsman, got him into one of the classes for civilians. He took a black eye and a dislocated shoulder, he says, but as the Rough-rider Sergeant put it, they taught him to ride."

"What fun!" cried Gail, sipping her coffee. "I'll write to him to bring down his kit, if he's still got any! The weather may change, and I don't suppose he has forgotten much after such a training."

"You never forget riding," Jack assured her. "I found that was true last year when I played the Duke of Wellington's despatch rider in that film."

"Jack!" remonstrated Nita. "You know they decided to strap your ankles together under the horse."

"Well, it looked all right. They were outside the frame."

"It was all right till you started yelling 'Despatches! Despatches!' so loud that you frightened the wretched horse and made him jump off."

Jack rubbed his nose reminiscently. "It did turn into a bit of a Cossack act then," he confessed. "And it wasn't silk handkerchiefs I collected in my mouth—not by a long way!"

"Poor Jack!" bubbled Gail. "What a shame!"

"Yes, you look tragic!" Jack told her, and after a few minutes' more vague chat, "I must be off," he remarked. "I ought to be at the theatre." He lit another cigarette, and arranged the arm-chair cushion more comfortably behind his head.

"Yes," said Nita. "Don't forget you're rehearsing the incipient criminals at eleven!"

"Little darlings, yes!" murmured Jack. "They've got two new ones this week. Pathetic mites—the matron had to spank one of them last night and put her to bed without supper for making eyes at a Sergeant from Preston Barracks all through the show. He had his wife with him, and was highly embarrassed."

"Serve the little besom right!" declared Nita.

"Yes, but she gave poor Mrs Clayton a fearful clout back. I shall try to get her sacked."

"Well, make it snappy then, Jack! . . . You'll be late, Jack!"

"I shall, if I hang about," agreed Jack, looking at the bronze clock with knightly supporters on the mantel-piece.

"That hasn't been going since Queen Victoria's Jubilee. . . . Get your shoes, Jack!"

"I must call for the car first at the garage," ruminated Jack.

"Why? There isn't anything *wrong* with it, is there?" enquired Gail, innocently.

"You needn't turn on the dewy-eyed, Gail! There's nothing wrong . . . not worth calling wrong. The front wheels are a trifle out of alignment, that's all. So you see, Nita, it wasn't my driving the night before! . . . And I'd only had two gins, say what you like."

"I daren't! . . . Jack, get your *shoes* on!"

"I'm looking for them. . . . I shall need the car to bring back the gramophone I bought yesterday from the shop."

"You've bought a gramophone? . . . Oh, Jack, we can't afford it! . . . And we can't possibly travel a gramophone as well as everything else!"

"It's quite all right . . . quite all right! It's a portable. I absolutely need a gramophone to help me work out arrangements."

"The sort of records *you* generally buy won't help—"

"That's where you're wrong, my dear. Only last night I picked up two lovely Tchaikovsky recordings."

"Where are they?"

"I broke them, unfortunately, getting out of the bus."

"*Are you going to the Pier?*" demanded Nita, drumming with her fist on the table.

"In one minute! I shan't be late . . . Gail, if it's fair to ask, will you and Derek be going back to Vincent Gynn when this panto finishes?"

"We haven't really made up our minds," answered Gail. "I don't think Derek'll be in a hurry to go in again with the Eaton Theatre gang. They treat him as if he was . . . well, anybody! I told him they're just foreigners and don't know who he is."

"I bet he's shown 'em by now!" sniggered Jack.

Gail flushed. "If you mean by that, Jack, that Derek throws his weight about, you're wrong, so there!"

"Sorry, old girl! . . . Yes, really!" answered Jack, his face a moon of contrition.

"If Derek's proud, he's got something to be proud of," continued Gail loudly, while the leg of her jodhpur rippled under the angry taps of her riding-whip.

"Jack only meant, dear," said Nita silkily, "that Derek's a wee bit quick sometimes to take offence where none is meant."

"Is he? . . . God knows he'd have excuse enough if he was! It's so easy, isn't it, for insensitive people to criticize an artist for being sensitive. They don't understand. . . . I must change. Thanks for the coffee, Nita." She set her cup down on the table with a rattle and walked out.

Jack and Nita sat in silence listening to her light step ascending the stairs. A door shut sharply above.

"You fool, Jack!" said Nita.

"Why?" spluttered Jack. "I never dreamed she'd go in off the deep end over a remark like that! Anyone would suppose she was still in love with that twerp!"

"So she is. I told you she was."

"Then what's she messing about with Peter Warner for? You don't know what to make of her! One minute all thrills at the chance of getting Peter to herself up on the Downs, where only the sheep can see what's going on: the next, biting my nose off for saying what everybody in the profession knows to be true about her precious hubby! It don't make sense."

"Which only shows, my darling, how little you know about women—thank God!" The sound of the church clock striking came faintly through the window. "Jack, did you hear that? It's just going twelve!" she cried.

"*What?* . . . My God, Nita, you might have told me it was so late!" Jack cast his dressing-gown into the grate, whence Nita rescued it with a scream as it began to smoulder, and groped madly for his shoes.

V

A couple of days after this conversation Peter Warner travelled down to Brighton in the afternoon by First-class Pullman. He had not yet learnt to gauge with accuracy the elastic power of eight pounds a week, and he also wanted quiet to consider his mission. For it was a mission that he was undertaking, and the sender was Monty Du Parc. Monty had taken Peter a few days before to an excellent lunch at a newly opened West End restaurant—Monty was always one of the first to be in on such events; even Athelstan Rigglesworth did not get many more free meals from proprietors hopeful of publicity—and there, over the coffee and cigars, he had opened to Peter his alarms about Gail's future. "She's really being naughty," he complained. "We offered her the lead in the next tour of *Spotlights* through her agent Stulitzer, and she turned us down flat." Peter opined that it was a rotten offer after all she'd been led to hope. Monty fondly agreed that Gail was the dearest girl in the world, but it was no use, he thought, her giving herself the airs and graces of a star before she had arrived. Now, if she had gone into *Spotlights*, she would have earned Fizz's good-will, and gained a lot of valuable experience; they had an Ar marager in charge of *Spotlights*, who could have taught her a whole lot of things.

"I'm only thinking of her future," repeated Monty, "and of yours, too, Peter."

"How's mine involved?" demanded Peter.

"That's what I asked you to lunch here to-day to tell you. It's strictly off the record, you'll understand . . . but, there, I'm always forgetting you've chucked journalism. . . . Athelstan'll never forgive you for deserting him, by the way. . . . Well, the news is that this year Fizz are going to do the big summer show at Blackpool in the Palatine Gardens, and I think they might very well choose you to do the principal musical numbers, and have Gail for their leading lady . . . a sort of try-out for the West End. I've put the notion up to both Forshaw and Zharkov, and they seem quite taken by it. You're getting a name among the younger light composers since Melodeon took you up, which, incidentally, shows how wise you were to go in with them; and neither old Bob nor Grigori has forgotten how well Gail shaped for that part she couldn't play at the end in *I Like You, Lady!*"

"This sounds too good to be true," said Peter, his eyes sparkling behind his gold spectacles.

"Well, if you want it to come true, you must persuade that little girl to be reasonable. If she lets someone else take the part in *Spotlights*, that someone else, whoever it may be, is likely to be considered first for Blackpool. Couldn't you run down to Brighton and give Gail a hint of what's cooking? She'll listen to you, if to no one else."

Peter, as the train slowed past the lamps of Preston Park station,

hoped Gail would listen to him, but he did not feel quite so sure as Monty seemed to be. . . . Yet what a lot it would mean both for her and for him if they got launched with a big success at Blackpool in the season!

After an early dinner at his hotel, he went straight to the Regent Pier, getting into the crowded little theatre just as the evening performance of the pantomime began. He could hardly wait for the interval to rush round behind and seek Gail. He found her alone in the little dressing-room above the waves which she shared with Dick Whittington, costumed in a blue-silk shirt, short trunks, tights, and high-heeled shoes.

"You look amazingly like a silk-mercier's daughter from Cheap-side, I must say!" he told her, after their first greetings.

"Don't you understand," she said, fastening a large brooch of paste brilliants across the low-cut opening of her shirt, "that I'm disguised as the cabin-boy and have just been shipwrecked?"

"In those slops? . . . Well, it's all right by me!"

"I'm not so sure it is by Mavis," she answered, lifting one long silken leg to smooth out a crease. "I'm told she counted on a girl who would wear slacks in this scene and long skirts for all the others . . . I'm being a cat again. . . . How's everybody? . . . How's Monty?"

"Sends you his love, and you're a naughty girl."

Gail made no answer for the moment; she seemed to be intent upon pinning her tasselled sailor's cap becomingly upon her curls. "Are you coming riding with me to-morrow morning?" she asked abruptly.

"You bet I am!" answered Peter. "I can just get into my old breeches still, though I can hardly bend my knee in them. . . . Slim youth I must have been! . . . Is it time for me to clear out?"

"In a minute."

"Well, before I go, will you explain two things to me?"

"What are they?" She looked round from the glass with a touch of suspicion.

"First, when the old rustic asks Dick Whittington on Highgate Hill, 'Canst tell me, brave youth, the way to London town?' why does Dick reply, 'Nay, gaffer, I cannot tell thee the way to London town, but if you care for it I can give you an excellent imitation of Gracie Fields singing 'Sally!'?"

"It's Mavis's speciality. It had to be brought in."

"I see. And then, why did King Rat, after threatening Fitzwarren, you, and the Cook in the kitchen till you all ran away, stay behind to sing 'Bless this House'?"

"I don't know. Run along, Peter!" answered Gail. "You'll come round afterwards, won't you?"

In the narrow corridor outside her room Peter ran into Nita Kelham, also in tights, as the Captain's Mate. "You look lovely!" he told her.

"Really?" She beamed with delight. "But, of course, you *say* that!"

"I mean it! If Jack weren't so terribly jealous——"

"What's that?" croaked a voice behind them; and, turning, Peter detected Jack beneath the tall, domed skull and fur-trimmed tunic that tradition assigns to Alderman Fitzwarren. "I'm surprised at you, Professor!" he admonished Peter. "What do you think of our opera?"

"*Clean*, isn't it?" demanded Nita eagerly.

Peter assented, and told Jack, in answer to his enquiry, that he meant to stay in Brighton a couple of days.

"You must come and see us," answered Jack, "and hear my new gramophone."

"Oh, that gramophone!" Nita rolled her eyes to Heaven. "He's just bought it. He can afford to! We're running this show and both the West End Pantomimes . . . in case you didn't know it! But why he had to get just that gramophone of all others! . . ."

"It had to be a portable," replied Jack in an injured tone.

"Quite!" said Nita. "It wouldn't fit into the back of the car, it was too large; and when it was sort of half in, it wouldn't come out: *he'd* forgotten to take the handle off. We were pushing and tugging with two men from the shop for half an hour in East Street, at the busiest time of the day, and collected quite a mob. . . . Then we got hold of a small boy and told him to wriggle his head and shoulders into the back of the car and try to take the handle off . . . and *he* got stuck, and began to yell blue murder. The crowd called us cruel brutes, and an old lady hit Jack over the head with her umbrella. Then the cops came along and charged us with causing an obstruction. . . . It was grand! If we'd only thought of bringing throwaways advertising the panto to hand out to the crowd, we might have done ourselves a bit of good!"

"Well, it's safe here now," said Jack cheerfully, "and I always did want an instrument you could just pick up and carry about with you."

There was a rustle of silken skirts, a wave of perfume, and Alderman Fitzwarren's Cook, in red corkscrew curls and a crinoline as gorgeous as any of the Empress Eugénie's, swayed past them, and then turned to say to Nita, "Darling, you'll lend me those devastatingly twee pearl ear-rings of yours to wear in the Palace scene one night, won't you?" "Get along with you, Wilfred!" said Nita, and turning to Peter, "He's such a kind creature, you know, in spite of his nonsense!" "We're on, Nita!" said Jack, pushing her before him.

Peter sought his doubtfully stable green-plush stall again amid the shrieking of children, and turned up his coat-collar against the brine-laden draughts percolating through every aperture and crevice of the gimcrack pavilion, untouched since it was put up in the 'nineties. He wondered what perverted genius had first been smitten with the idea of constructing a theatre in the middle of the sea, and concluded that

people would put up with anything that could be painted in the colours of romance. The next minute, as Gail came on hand in hand with the plump little Principal Boy (who just contrived to get level with her chin by the aid of a long feather in "his" cap and a pair of elevators), Peter had to confess that he, too, was one of these people. The tawdry scene, the hackneyed sentiment of the love-duet, the squalling infants, and the bitter breezes faded from his consciousness, and it was as though he were aware only of the night and the sea around and beneath them. He could almost have sworn he heard the wavelets lapping the iron pillars of the pier and whispering upon the shingle, saw the misty night-sky overhead, with its glimmering, secretive stars.

They were alone, the two of them, on the deck of a majestically moving ship—Isolde's ship, if you liked, lifting itself over sunlit sweeps towards the shining cliffs of Cornwall. But Peter dismissed that image as soon as it floated into his mind, because Wagner's mighty swell was impudently interfering with a new theme that was all his own—a rising and falling melody of the ocean.

"Do be quiet!" complained the mother of two loads of trouble, turning round from the row in front of him, and he realized that he was softly but penetratingly whistling his new-found melody, and thereby preventing the harassed lady and her offspring from hearing the riddles which Alderman Fitzwarren (though under sentence of death) was putting to his captor the Sultan of Morocco. So he apologized and kept quiet until King Rat was slain, the Highland Girl Pipers turned up opportunely at the Sultan's Palace to entertain him, and the scene changed to the "road home"—rural except for a grand piano, which at first puzzled Peter, but then filled his heart with joy. For here King Rat (reprieved after execution) sat down to accompany Gail in *her* speciality.

To Peter, as he listened, it seemed that Gail was singing better than he had ever heard her sing before, and his heart warmed as he flattered himself that she was doing this for him—surely it could not be this theatre, this audience that were inspiring her? A thrill ran through him as he realized that he was to be here in Brighton for two days alone with her, was going to talk with her, take her out to meals, sit with her, walk with her, take her riding through the romantic wildness of the Downs! He promised himself to make the most of his opportunities, to drink this cup of happiness to the last drops without care for appearances or consequences. . . . If only Gail would see it in the same light!

The tumult of clapping at the end of her second song brought at least half of him back to actuality, and as he joined in almost fiercely, he felt the creative energy of the musician welling up in him more overpoweringly than before. What was there he could not achieve with Gail's voice to give lustre to his songs? . . . She *must* be per-

suaded to take Monty's advice and choose the path that would bring her in the summer to the big show in Blackpool, with its numbers by Peter Warner . . . the big show that would lead in its turn to the still bigger one, the London production of *In Modern Mood* (that was going to be the title), with book and music wholly by Peter Warner, and Gail Darien as the West End star!

They would be recognized by then as a team, as a sure-fire combination . . . and surely, surely by then it would have become a partnership extending from their professional to their private lives? What was the use of her continuing to distil her preciousness upon Derek Vortigern? That mean and muddy little soul never had been, never would be, the crystal cup worthy to contain such a divine elixir! . . . It is to be feared that, before the opening of the doors at the end of the pantomime swept the shivering audience out upon a gale, Peter had got so far as to see the view from the balcony of their London flat over the trees and lake of Regent's Park, had begun upon the furnishings of the big music-room, and even chosen the exact spot in which to set the Ehrard Grand, with the blue Delft vase filled with daffodils, upon its lid when closed. . . . How marvellous it would be . . . if only Gail would see it in the same light!

VI

The next morning fulfilled Gail's hope of a change in the weather. It was one of those days on which Brighton vindicates its title to be the Naples of England. The January sun glittered with spring-tide warmth out of a sky, deep and tender, which lent an elegant outline even to the carved urns, tourelles, and gables crowning the Victorian villadom of Hove. Up the spacious avenues leading from the shimmer of the sea to the pale-green rim of the Downs behind the houses, the air blew fresh and keen without any bite to it. Weather-wise inhabitants might shake their heads and prophesy rain as the sequel to this early brilliance; such possibilities did not trouble the two riders making their way up the Drive towards the hills.

"I nearly had to leave you to ride alone after all," Gail informed Peter, as they turned into the Old Shoreham Road.

"Good heavens, why?" cried Peter, a betraying alarm at the peril he had escaped crossing his face.

She had read his thought, he realized, as he saw the smile that subtly curved her reddened lips. He smiled steadily back at her until she dropped her eyes to examine her boot, speckless as its polish was under the neat crease of the jodhpur turn-up.

"What happened?" he then asked her.

"I couldn't get out of the house at all," she explained. "Jack's new gramophone . . . it's as large as a small cottage . . . was wedged

in the passage between the front door and the hat-stand, and nobody could move it. Jack came running down in his dressing-gown to try to shift it; the postman was pushing and pushing at the bell—he rings more than twice in Brighton, it seems—her toy Pom was barking its silly little head off, and she was bawling it out from the kitchen; I was screaming at Jack because I was late and wanted to get away—it was a circus, I can tell you! Then Bella, that's the Pom, flew at Jack's dressing-gown and began to tear it, so he kicked out at the little wretch—I couldn't blame him, and he only had soft slippers on—but unluckily he missed Bella and brought down the hat-stand—smack on to the parcel of new records he bought yesterday afternoon! While he was picking out the pieces and blasting, Nita and I managed to shift the gramophone a few inches, so that we could open the door for the postman to pass in a registered letter for Jack. I *hope* it was some good news, but I'm afraid, from the way he sighed, it was one of the 'Unless within fourteen days . . .' variety!"

Thus talking and laughing they had threaded their way through the last upland fringe of villas, and emerged upon a grassy stretch across which the wind blew like a magic restorative. "Oh, how glorious!" exclaimed Gail, stuffing her beret into her jacket-pocket and shaking out her hair.

The next minute her horse, used to the changeless routines of hacking, broke of its own accord into a trot and then into a canter along the edge of a field running beside the road up to a signpost. Peter followed, shaking down easily into the saddle after a stride or two, in spite of the years that had passed since he had been on a horse. His eyes were fixed on the golden mist that the sun made of Gail's hair, and as presently he drew level with her, he enjoyed her supple silhouette outlined upon the black winter lacework of a copse on the farther side of the field.

The ground rose steeply at the end of the bridle-path where the Dyke Road ran across, and the horses, as if on a military order, dropped back to their steady walk.

"How are you getting on?" called Gail, panting slightly, and with a coral flush on her cheek that blended into her pale rouge.

"Swell!" he called in reply. "It's coming back to me! . . . Why have I given it up for so long?"

"You look disgustingly professional," Gail observed, as their horses drew together again upon the road. "In a day or two you'll be wanting to go blind ahead over fences and ditches, and telling me I ought to be in the riding-class. . . . Which would be true!"

"I'm taking no fences, Gail," answered Peter, "until you're ready to come with me. But *when* you are, we'll take some big ones, and I don't mean on horseback, either!"

There was a minute's silence as, to the clink of bits, they moved slowly along the road. To their left, far below them, the dim grey

mass of Hove and Portslade stretched along the coast to meet the factory chimneys of Shoreham, with their smoke-wisps making lazy stains upon the glinting blue of the sea. In front, across the green and brown undulations of the Downs, the black belt of trees that marks the Devil's Dyke rose gradually into view. Then Gail spoke.

"I don't know what you mean by 'taking fences,'" she said slowly. "And I don't think I want to. . . . Shall we trot?"

"Not for a minute, please! Look, dear! It's not the most important thing I have to ask you, but will you do one thing for me?"

"Depends!" she answered, flicking the locks of her horse's mane with the handle of her whip. "What is it?"

"If Fizz send you that contract for *Spotlights* again, will you——"

"No!" she interrupted angrily. "And I'm not going to be played up in this way! If Monty has sent you down as his agent, please drop the subject!"

"Gail!" Peter stared at her aghast. "What's the matter? Have I put my foot in it? If so, I'm sorry . . . believe me, I am!"

"Oh, I know you didn't mean it, Peter!" she answered. "But—but—well, I suppose I can't help getting suspicious. You men always stand in together when there's a smart bit of business to be done, don't you? And I'm just sick of being pressed, day and night, to put my head in a noose, for Fizz to pull the string when and as they like."

"But who on earth presses you to do that?" demanded Peter.

Her lip stiffened. "Never mind! . . . I just don't want *you* to get into the same rotten game, Peter . . . using people for your own ends. I—I—thought I'd found a better sort of friend."

"In what way am I trying to use you for my own ends, Gail?"

"Why do you want to force me to sign with Fizz for an indefinite run of that corny old abomination, *Spotlights*? It never stops—that show! I could be stuck there . . . one week out in every four . . . until next Christmas, or even after, without a hope! Why should I do it?"

"Simply because it's the way Fizz have chosen to groom you for their big summer show at Blackpool this year!"

"What, Peter dear?"

"Yes. That's the secret. It's out now . . . whether or not Monty wanted me to be so definite. That's their plan . . . you to be the lead and me to write the music. Just think of it!"

She turned her head to him, her eyes glowing. "Oh, Peter! How wonderful! Why couldn't you begin by telling me that?"

"You didn't give me a chance before clawing my eyes out!"

"Never mind that now! This alters everything. . . . Yes, I know I'm being actressy! . . . I am one! . . . They'll give me a definite undertaking about Blackpool, will they?"

Peter found himself driven to hedge. "I can't go quite so far as that," he admitted. "But Monty left no doubt in my mind that you

were the favourite among the girls they were considering for the show. . . . Please, Gail, think of all it means! I can't write the songs for anyone else that I would for you!"

Gail's face fell. "Oh, Peter. You're not being fair!"

"How not fair? I can't understand you one bit this morning!"

"You're trying to put it over me, aren't you, that if I won't sign with Fizz on their own terms, I'll spoil your chances? . . . No, I won't do it!"

"Well," said Peter, taken aback, "I admit I do care about my music and wish it to succeed."

"Of course you do," she agreed in a softened voice. "Why shouldn't you? I don't blame you for that. But you shouldn't—"

"Shouldn't what?" His temper was rising. "Shouldn't let you know you are the only girl in the world who's going to make that success for my music—for my light songs, first, and then for my big stuff when it's ready? Am I being silly in that?"

"Very . . . and very sweet, Peter! But it isn't the way to do business."

"Damn business!" he declared.

"And now you're going heavily emotional, which is sillier still!" she admonished him.

"*Gail!*" he shouted in so furious a voice that her startled horse jumped forward, causing her to lose a stirrup and grab for a moment at the mane to steady herself.

"Must you frighten my horse?" she demanded resentfully. Then, relenting at sight of his penitent face, "I understand all about it, Peter," she murmured; "but it's all a pipe-dream, you know. It'll make us both miserable—you more than me! D'you know what you'd do if you were wise?" she added, looking sadly between her horse's ears.

"No! What?" he growled.

"Turn round and gallop like Dick Turpin back into Brighton! Then take the first train to London . . . and forget Gail Darien for good and all!"

He pulled his horse up. "Is that an order?" he asked.

She made no answer, but let her mount wander at will, until it stopped to make a snatch at a tussock of long grass by the wayside. Peter, after waiting a minute in the middle of the road, followed to the spot. "You see," he said quietly, "you couldn't send me away."

"It isn't my business to give you orders," she answered, turning her face from him to let her eyes rove round the steep amphitheatre of turf that fell away on their right into Waterhall valley. "Too much responsibility, thank you! Whatever happened, after, you'd lay it on me, wouldn't you? Stay or go, as you think best. . . . I—I'd like you to stay, of course . . . but I'm warning you here and now, Peter dear, it's not a bit of use, not one bit!"

"Shall we *ride*?" he asked her in exasperation, pointing to the smooth ribbons of turf that run round the lip of the great scoop. "We didn't bring 'em up here to walk 'em all the way like d——d wooden horses, did we?"

Without reply she gave the flanks of her mount a feather-touch with her heels, and let him go along the top strip of dark-green velvet. The horses had quickened almost to a gallop by the time they reached the end of the track, where sharply rising banks and a haystack shut out the view.

Their tempers had been mended by the exhilaration of the scamper, and they smiled at each other as they reined up. "Don't you think these horses could do with a few minutes' rest?" asked Gail.

"Don't I think *you* could do with a few minutes' rest is what you mean!" he mocked her. "You're in good condition for the open-air girl, aren't you? Bellows to mend!"

"Don't be rude!" she told him. "We always give them a blow about here!"

"As you like!" Peter dismounted, and brought his horse's head round so as to face her. At the same moment she swung one slim, fawn-clad leg over the saddle, and jumped down lightly, almost on to his toes. They stood face to face and close together between the two horses, cut off further from any possible observation by the bank that hid the road on one hand and by the haystack on the other. He saw her glowing cheeks and dancing eyes as through a mist; the scent from her tumbled hair, tinged the keen breeze of the Downs, made his head turn. "Getting very tough with me, weren't you, Peter?" she murmured. . . . "Oh! *Don't!* . . ."

The words came stifled, for Peter had caught her into his arms, and was seeking for her long, alluring mouth. She struggled, so that he kissed her neck and filled his mouth with her hair before he found her lips and pressed her head close for the kiss. Suddenly he felt her resistance weaken; for a second she hung limp, acquiescent, in his arms. Then with a violent effort she tore herself out of his hold, and took a stumbling step or two away from him.

"Why did you do that?" she asked with passionate reproach, her whole face and neck on fire.

"Because I had to!" The words came tumbling out of him. "Because I love you, and I've loved you . . . cared about nothing else in the world properly . . . since I first set eyes on you! Gail! It was fated!" He took a step towards her, dragging his reluctant horse away from its grazing, and reached out to catch her hand. But she snatched it away, and held it across her bosom as if in self-defence. "You're mad!" she panted. "And you've spoiled everything now!"

He stopped where he was, staring at her in bewilderment. . . . And that instant of surrender, then? It had meant nothing?

She read his thought in his look, and her fiery blush deepened. "I

was mad too!" she confessed. "But only for a second . . . only for one second!" She seemed to be justifying herself to some unseen judge.

"That was when your real self broke free!" he declared. "That second was the first in your new life!"

"No, no!" she cried. "It wasn't! It can't be! You're wrong, Peter, you're wrong!"

"Quit stalling!" he told her harshly. "You know you don't love Derek!"

"I do . . . I do!"

"You're fibbing, Gail! You can't love him!"

"But I tell you he's part of me now!"

"Just a habit!"

"No, more! Much more! . . . And, besides, he needs me. I can't let him down!"

"He lets *you* down all the time. . . . Every day and in every way! . . . He never has done anything different!"

"I've a job to do with him, and it isn't finished yet. I've to lead him to happiness."

"*There's* a fine pipe-dream if ever there was one! . . . And for that you'd wreck our two lives!"

She had gone dead white, and stood looking at him with a strange expression . . . it seemed of entreaty. As he gaped at her in total bewilderment, he became aware that her horse, whose reins she had dropped in her emotion, was straying away in search of more succulent herbage. Dragging his own, he went after it and recovered it, while some cold imp inside him laughed at his ridiculous posture, trying to carry through a passionate love-scene with two fidgety horses!

Gail took her reins from him in silence; then abruptly turned from him and hid her face in her arm against the saddle. "Don't start again!" she sobbed. "Don't start again!"

He stood beside her, his head in a whirl, without uttering a word. The bits clashed; the horses' teeth could be heard tearing at the yellowish grass; the wind, with a sudden chill in it, moaned round the corner of the haystack; the momentous seconds drifted regretfully by. Then a deep sigh tore at Peter's chest. "So, I suppose this is the end," he said in a dull voice.

She lifted her face, upon the tear-streaked pallor of which the make-up stood out starkly, and he was finally confounded to see a bitter smile pass over her lips and vanish again. Then she spoke in a calm voice. "Don't be silly!" she said. "We're back just where we were before. You lost your head. I—I shouldn't have let you. Now you're sane again—aren't you? . . . Aren't you?" she repeated shrilly.

"Just as you say," he acquiesced.

The next moment she wounded him almost to crying out by laughing at him as though he were a child. "There you are, you see!" she

cried. "I'm right, Peter! Why spoil a perfectly good friendship over nothing at all? Come on, we must get back; don't forget, I've a *matinée*!"

He passed round obediently to the offside of her horse, while she sorted out her reins with the indecision of the amateur. Then he held the stirrup while she swung up, putting hardly any weight upon his arm before she appeared, a remote, pale queen above him. Then he too remounted, and followed her back towards Hove beneath the dulling sky.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

PETER returned to London by a midday train. He realized, and Gail realized, that after what had passed between them he could not without embarrassment remain, as he had planned, another day with her in Brighton. Before they parted outside the stables in Hove she repeated almost apologetically her determination not to go into *Spotlights* with Fizz. "I feel like a rabbit," she said, "inspecting a trap. And the rabbit says, 'No, thank you!'"

It was on Peter's lips to ask her what she meant to do, then, when the pantomime ended; but he did not put the question. He felt it had ceased to be his business, and anyhow, he was too sore to face any more snubs or rebuffs just then.

The gloom in which he made the journey back to Town would have been deepened had he known that Gail was to spend her time between the afternoon and evening shows writing to Vincent Gynn to accept his offer for a twelve weeks' tour with his "new" revue, *Continental Revels*, opening in the last days of January. She wanted to cut off any possibility of her weakening in face of Peter's or Monty Du Parc's arguments—as for Derek, he could like it, and come with her or not as he preferred! She knew he still wanted her to go into *Spotlights*, ready to see her tied up for a year or more, perhaps, without prospects, so long as she was bringing a safe salary home—yet another who wanted to use her for his own convenience!

Peter was miserable enough without knowing this decision of Gail's, and, for the first time since he had taken and furnished it, his new flat in Chelsea gave him no pleasure when he re-entered it. There were letters waiting for him, the answers to which, he felt, could also wait. He sat down at the new piano he was acquiring by hire-purchase, struck a few chords, admired the tone, and rose from the stool with a sigh. He went to his book-case and took down, first a volume of musical essays by Ernest Newman, and then a novel of Dumas', but found he could not keep his mind on reading. Finally he seized hat, coat and cigarettes again, and took a bus at the corner of his street.

He got down at a turning off the Old Brompton Road, not far from the harp-shop. Here a converted mews opened under an arch. At the far end of the mews stood a small building detached from its neighbours. Originally it had been a carriage-house with a loft overhead. Now the door was painted bright-green; there were chintz curtains to the windows; and a strip of brass above the unreliable electric bell bore the name B. C. WARNER.

It struck Peter, as he crossed the cobble-stones of the yard in the

fading January evening, that there came from Beryl's windows the sound neither of harp nor of piano, which was unusual, since she was generally at home about this time. It was much too early for her to have started for the theatre, and, not being a woman's woman, she seldom went out to tea-parties.

He pressed the bell and waited. Then, unsure whether the bell had rung, he stood back and whistled up to the windows. There were no lights in them, but it was barely dusk yet, and Beryl might be there all the same. However, since no answer came, he was on the point of turning away when he saw a light go on in the upstairs room, and pressed the bell again, hard.

There was another long pause, and he was wondering what on earth Beryl was up to when he heard her step on the paved floor of the lower room, and she opened the door.

"Art deaf, luv?" he demanded with artificial gaiety.

"I thought you were still at Brighton," she answered listlessly. "Why are you back so soon? Things gone wrong?"

"Not so hot," he confessed.

Beryl shivered. "Well, come in and shut the door. I'll make a cup of tea."

Peter followed her into the lounge, which had been made out of the old carriage-room. The stone floor kept it chilly in spite of the rugs scattered here and there, and in spite of the fire, which woke shadowy gleams from the polished oak table, from the dark wood of the upright piano with its painted yellow wreaths, from the gilding of the old harp in a corner. There was not much more furniture, and Peter had always felt the place to be gaunt and uncomfortable; on her salary Beryl, he considered, could have managed something pleasanter. But she declared that it suited her because there was nobody above or below to make a grievance of her practising. She had been enormously insulted at her last place because a fellow-lodger had complained to the landlord about her harp-playing. "Makes the Missus and me feel as if we was in Heaven already," he had said, "and that nacherally gives us the dismals!"

"Mind if I leave the lights off?" enquired Beryl, putting a spill in the fire, and lighting a couple of twisted brass candlesticks on the mantel-piece. "They glare so. I'll go and put a kettle on."

"Just as you like," Peter told her, sitting down and putting his hands out to the flames. Instead of going out, however, to the tiny kitchen made from the former lamp-room, Beryl remained staring into the fire. Surprised, Peter glanced up at her, and noticed by the candle-light that her face looked haggard, and that her lips were drawn into the tight line which always denoted stormy weather with her. He hesitated to speak because he always felt when he saw those signs just like the small boy who had feared as much as adored his clever, dominating elder sister. However, as she did not move, sunk, appar-

ently in her gloomy reverie, he ventured to ask, "Nothing wrong, is there, old girl?"

She started as if out of a dream, and answered harshly, "Wrong? No! Why should there be? . . . I'll make that tea."

She went towards the kitchenette, followed by Peter's worried eyes. In the doorway she turned and said abruptly, "There's plenty wrong, and I suppose I'll have to tell you. . . . But just wait a minute!" She disappeared, and from the other side of the partition there came the hiss of a gas-ring and then the clink of tea-cups.

"Beryl!" called Peter. "You know you don't *have* to tell me anything you don't want to. . . . But if I can be any use——"

"Oh, *wait!*" she called back impatiently; and in a few minutes she reappeared carrying a small tray with the tea on it in gay cottage ware. She set it down on a stool in front of the fire, and poured out for him. Then she threw herself into a low arm-chair on the opposite side of the hearth and lit a cigarette. "D'you want anything to eat, by the way?" she enquired after a minute. "If so, there are biscuits on the dresser in the kitchen, and you can fetch them yourself."

"No, thanks," answered Peter, and as she continued silent, "What is it, Beryl?" he asked gently.

She flicked ash into the flame with a nervous yet precise movement of her little finger. "It's this," she said. "I'm through with Grigori. Now laugh!"

Peter did not laugh, but he held his breath a moment before asking, "Definitely through? Or is it just——"

"Oh, it's as definite as broken crockery!" she retorted. "You're feeling the perfect Mr I-Told-You-So, aren't you?"

"Nothing like it, Beryl!" her brother assured her. "But won't you tell me what has happened?"

"Mr Zharkov and I misunderstood one another, it seems."

"I certainly always thought it was impossible for him to understand a girl like you."

"I don't mind telling you we had as good as arranged, before Christmas, to set up house together . . . or so at least I thought. You can't divorce a wife who's lost in Poland . . . that didn't worry me. Nor did I mind when Grigori suggested a flat out at Hendon. I saw no need for publicity about the affair, and he could always get to Leicester Square in twenty minutes in his Chrysler. The first thing that showed me he and I were thinking along different lines was when he told me I must resign from the orchestra. It was beneath his dignity, it seemed, for me to be a player in one of his bands!"

"I suppose he would see it that way," said Peter, staring into the fire.

"I told him straight I wasn't ashamed of my profession, and that I was going on playing the harp in his orchestra . . . or somebody else's, if he preferred it . . . and taking any chances I could get of

chamber concerts or work in musical films . . . all the ways, in short, by which I've so far scraped up a respectable living."

"A man like that, you know, wouldn't feel you were really and wholly his woman so long as you——"

"His woman!" Beryl blazed out, sitting upright in her arm-chair with her pansy eyes glowing in dark fury. "His woman! . . . Not on your life . . . in that sense! No man 'keeps' Beryl Warner, not even a husband if I ever develop one! I earn my own keep, thank you! . . . Oh, of course, I knew Grigori wasn't the sort of man who could be asked to share a Chelsea or Bloomsbury flat and lunch in Corner Houses. So I admitted that if he had to live *de luxe* with me, he must pay for the trimmings . . . all the heap of things, it seems, he can't be happy without. I can't dress myself, for instance, as the women he goes about with do, so I told him it was only fair he should foot the bills I ran up for his pleasure rather than mine. But I insisted that, however expensive I had to be in Paris or Monte Carlo or Piccadilly—if he wasn't shy about being seen with me there!—I was going to stay a working woman, retaining my independence, and he could like it!"

"I can see from here how much he did!" interjected Peter with a snort. "So then?"

"He went on explaining earnestly . . . *but* earnestly! And bit by bit it all came out. The beautiful flat at Hendon, he wasn't going to live in it with me. His 'position' came up again, and his hatred of 'shcandalmongers'—Peter had never before heard Beryl deride Zharkov's faint foreign accent—"and all the rest. Of course, I understood by now and explained *delicately*"—her voice seemed to Peter to take on a razor's edge—"that I had at least expected a solo engagement for the run."

"And how did he take that?"

"He was . . . incredible!" Her voice choked a moment, and Peter saw the glitter of tears on the velvet of her eyes. She recovered herself and went on: "He got up—all this happened, by the way, over the coffee after lunch in his Ritzy apartment in St. James's Street the day before yesterday—he got up with a fatuous look, and telling me not to be a silly girl, went over to an *escritoire*, unlocked it, and brought out a super-looking red morocco case——"

"Good God!" raged Peter. "I could strangle him!"

"I felt like that, too. It was pretty crude. . . . But the bracelet wasn't—oh dear, no! . . . My favourite gems and all grand stones! . . . Still, can you beat it? Trying to buy Beryl Clare with a bracelet!"

"Tell me what you said!"

"I couldn't remember half, if I tried. It would have needed a shorthand typist to get it all down. But I know I chucked the bracelet on to the parquet floor . . . hard! . . . and he stooped

down with an agonized face to pick it up and see if any of the stones had been loosened. . . . So, to take his mind off that, I threw one of his best Sèvres coffee-cups on top, and left. That's all. For God's sake let's think of something else! Shall we go out somewhere this evening?"

Peter stared at her. "But your theatre!" he said.

"I've no theatre any longer. . . . Didn't you notice *that*?" She turned and indicated a draped object at the far end of the room. Peter, whose eye had been caught when he entered by the glint of the old French Gothic harp with its saints and angels which had been played by Beryl's grandmother and handed down in the family, had not observed the instrument which Beryl herself used, a fine Ehrard Grecian, standing in its cover over there in the shadow. He looked at it in bewilderment. "But—but—surely," he stammered, "the show's not come off? It's running, isn't it, until the end of this month?"

"How innocent you are!" said Beryl. "Don't you realize that the first thing I did when I left Grigori's flat after the row was to telephone Les Linacre from the box at the Tube?"

"Les Linacre? What for?"

"To give in my notice, my child! . . . Les wouldn't hear of it, but anyhow, by offering to resign, I had beaten Zharkov to it. I played that night as usual; but at the end of the show Les sent for me and, looking very awkward, said he'd been given instructions that I was to leave at once—they'd send me on my money. Les was wild. He hates the girl who's to take my place, and wanted to know if they thought he had harpists of my quality queueing up on his staircase? But he couldn't do anything about it; whoever conducts, Zharkov is always nominally Musical Director for all the Fizz shows. . . . Les asked me what the row was about . . . salary? . . . if so, why hadn't I come to him? . . . I told him to think what he damned well pleased . . . and so you see I'm out!"

She rose, took one of the candles from the mantel-shelf and put it on a small table near her harp. Then, removing the cover, she sat down and tilted the instrument towards her. Her hands wandered over the strings, striking a few mournful *glissandi*; then she began to play. Peter did not recognize the piece, but the anguish in it as she rendered it seemed to him almost unbearable. . . . Surely a gross brute like Zharkov could not have made his exquisite sister suffer to this degree. . . . Was it not in herself that her unhappiness was rooted, in her own blind, insatiable desires . . . her rebellious strivings after a more perfect satisfaction of her impulses than life held out? . . . And yet . . . you could never tell with a woman. . . . She might have loved Zharkov and been wounded in her tender place by his brutality. . . . Peter almost felt like asking her to cease playing. She seemed to pluck at his own miserable heart, too,

with her fingers. Not till this moment had he felt his utter forlornness, the black gulf of his separation from Gail! . . .

Almost before he realized it, Beryl had stopped, and was standing over him, leaning on the corner of the mantel-piece. "To Hell with all that!" she said. "Take me out somewhere, if you can afford it!"

"Sure!" said Peter. "What about the St. Andrew's? You haven't seen the new Tod Wilson show, have you? . . . And a bit of dinner somewhere first?"

"No," said Beryl. "We'll eat somewhere afterwards if you want to. But I'd like to go to the St. Andrew's. They've a new trumpeter there in a swing combination who's said to be super. . . . But tell me, Peter . . . I apologize for pitying myself all the time . . . what happened at Brighton?"

"Oh, everything went wrong. . . . I couldn't get Gail to accept Fizz's offer."

"Well, it wasn't so hot, was it?"

"You know as well as I do that one never gets a decent offer the first time from a firm like Fizz! Their minds don't work that way. You must let them think they are being clever with you, and wait for your chance to get things put right afterwards. I should have thought Gail had been long enough in the profession to realize that."

"Sounds to me as if you were annoyed with her!" Beryl smiled faintly.

"I'm not; but it's silly of her to throw away a big chance for want of a little finesse!"

"You must be even more innocent than I said just now if you expect finesse from a blonde of that type. If things don't go their way at once, they just blow up."

Peter laughed without enjoyment. "It dishes me, too, you see," he went on. "As I told you, Monty has as good as promised that I shall do the principal musical numbers for their Blackpool show, and now Gail won't be there to sing them."

"So what? Some other girl will sing them . . . just as well, probably."

"It won't be the same thing," groaned Peter.

"I say, aren't you losing your grip a bit over this lanky sop?"

"Beryl, don't call her that, *please!*"

"Peter, this is getting tragic! For God's sake, be your age!"

"Oh, I know quite well what you mean! But, if I ever had any fancies of that kind, they've gone west too."

"Poor Peter! You *have* had a jolly trip to the seaside! Still, it may be just as well, you know. The damsel has a husband, hasn't she?"

"Yes—and a fine twerp he is!"

"Oh, that goes without saying! Is Gail in love with him?"

"Seems to be. You wouldn't believe it possible if you saw him!"

"Is he in love with her?"

"If jealousy's a proof of love!"

"Not such a bad one!" Beryl lit a cigarette from the remaining candlestick on the mantel-piece and stood contemplating the fire. "Some women get all the breaks, don't they?" she said at length. "This languid blonde is being wooed by the biggest management in London—and it's not good enough for her! She has a wildly jealous husband . . . and my brother mooning about after her like a strayed calf. Yet what has she got that—that arouses it all? I'm damned if I can see it. I was at that rehearsal when she vamped producer Inman, and I wasn't so terribly impressed. . . . Well, Peter, deepest condolences and all that! . . . We ought to be starting if we're going to that show, oughtn't we?"

The St. Andrew's Theatre, to which Beryl and Peter went that evening, had for some years prospered almost automatically, thanks to the partnership of a singularly warming comedian and a singularly stylish girl singer of pointed songs. Of all the theatres run by Fizz, it gave them the least trouble, and Inman's task, when he produced the intimate revues in which the two stars appeared, was almost negligible. Peter, on leaving his stall beside Beryl during the interval, encountered Monty Du Parc issuing from the crowded bar. Monty always looked incredibly stagy in evening dress, though there was not in fact anything particularly flamboyant about his waistcoats, studs, or links. Peter drew Monty into a quiet corner, and told him he was just back from Brighton, and had had no luck with his mission.

"Aha?" Monty waited for more information, twisting his moustache tufts. Peter summarized his argument with Gail, making the necessary tactful omissions.

"What's she going to do, then, when the panto ends, if she won't come into *Spotlights*?" enquired Monty when he had finished.

"I don't know," confessed Peter. "I—I didn't like to ask her."

"Really?" Monty's eyebrows went up. "Why didn't you? I should have thought it a very natural question for a friend like you to put. Now we don't know what may be cooking!"

Monty hooked off his glasses and began to polish them with his white-silk handkerchief. There might have been the faintest suspicion of a furrow in the middle of his forehead, but that was probably due to the effort to focus his sight without spectacles.

"I'm sorry," said Peter lamely. "I felt that everything was bitched up, and that what she did next wasn't my affair."

Monty set the horn-rims in place again; his equanimity seemed to have come back. "I don't know that it's as bad as all that," he said. "It shows she's rather a headstrong little girl, who likes to quarrel

with her bread-and-butter. But, then, so do lots of them. I'm not inclined to take it tragically, you know."

"*You* may not be!" retorted Peter with asperity. "But what's to become of my music for the Blackpool show, eh?"

"That's not affected, old lad! Think up your best ideas! They'll be called for, I assure you."

"Tell me about this show, Monty! Will Inman be producing?"

Monty shrugged his shoulders. "Difficult to say. . . . Strictly under your hat, Master Inman's not too popular with them upstairs at All-Star House these days. *I Like You, Lady!* comes off on Saturday fortnight."

"And a week or two after that, I suppose, Inman'll be a 'back number'?" suggested Peter cynically.

"No!" Monty smoothed his moustaches. "But he's had a failure, and he'd better not have another. It's up to him."

Something in Monty's tone gave Peter a chilly feeling. The gay, warmly furnished theatre, filled with strains of happy music, seemed suddenly to turn as cold and indifferent as the tiled brilliance of a public subway, which signposts you to the exits with no offer of hospitality. "*Get on or get out!*" seemed for the moment to be written across the soft, apricot velvet of the tabs.

Monty patted Peter on the shoulder. "Don't you bother about Inman, old boy! I happen to know the other directors are sold on you, which is all that matters."

"Yes, and I know who's done it. God bless you, Monty!"

Monty paused for a second; then hit Peter playfully on the shoulder again. "You talk a lot of blah, old lad!" he declared.

"You can't fool me, Monty!"

"No?" enquired Monty affectionately. "Well, you work hard on any ideas you've got—we'll soon call you to a conference. . . . There goes the bell! You'd better get back to your place."

Peter slipped back into his seat at Beryl's side, and, as the tabs parted, whispered his encouraging news into her ear. It was the first ray of hope he had felt since leaving Gail outside the riding-stables in Hove. It might knock away half his pleasure to think that it would probably not be she who would sing his songs; but he couldn't be quite unstirred by the thought that he might, at last, be about to submit his music to the verdict of the public in a really big way . . . under the massed spotlights of Fizz!

II

"Did you ever," grumbled Jack Kelham, making his way with Nita along the rainswept front of Hastings on an evening at the end of February—"did you ever see a more dismal sight than a seaside town

in mid-winter? Anything so gloomy and depressing I've never known and hope I never shall!"

Wherein Jack (who always when he picked up a paper turned away at once from the leaders on "What are Herr Hitler's Aims?" to the theatrical gossip) showed himself optimistic. After all, the lights were still gleaming on the wet wilderness of the esplanade; the buses were going by with lamps and illuminated sign-boards; and golden and rosy glows fell from the shop-windows upon the two patient strollers, as they pressed forward, bent double against the gusts, on their way to the Silver Pavilion, where Vincent Gynn's *Continental Revels* were being held this week. Nita carried a large bag and Jack a brown-paper parcel that was rapidly spotting into pulp beneath the rain.

"If only," said Nita, "you had taken the car to the garage yesterday morning when I told you she was knocking!"

"She wasn't knocking at all!" retorted Jack, up in arms at once. "That was a screw loose in the headlights!"

"Hers—or yours?" enquired Nita.

"All she wants," insisted Jack, "is de-coking. So you needn't worry!"

"Hell!" exclaimed Nita, as a bus sprayed her with liquid mud all up her stocking. "I needn't worry—needn't I?"

Jack changed the subject. "Business has been lousy, hasn't it, ever since we started out? I've never known anything like it. I almost wish now we'd done what Bobo did, and got into that P.N.T. tour."

"Chance is a great thing, isn't it? But anything would have been better than what you had to choose!"

"Oh, I don't know. Vincent's not such a bad old fruit . . . though he does screw you down on salary."

"Screws you down first," said Nita viciously, "and then you have to fight to get what's left."

"As a matter of fact, I think it was a misunderstanding about the payment for the extra *matinée* last week."

"Boloney! He never meant to pay, though he's bound to."

"He would have given it to us then if he'd been able to get change for a fifty-pound note. But there was no one in the theatre who could do it."

"In a theatre where *his* company was working? You couldn't have got change for a ten-bob note!"

"I expect he'll add it on this Friday," persisted Jack.

"Jack, really! An old rat-bag who was too mean to stand the stagehands a drink after all the extra trouble they had with our stuff on Monday. They expected it, you know, and I felt as mean as two cents."

"It was all right. I took them to the bar to have one on me."

"That was Vincent's place—not yours!"

"Oh, he wasn't offended! Matter of fact, he came along and had one too."

"I give you up!" stormed Nita. "We shall land in the gutter! . . . Ow! . . . I have!" Crossing a side-street, she had stepped straight into the rivulet pouring down it.

Jack did his best to comfort her; then resumed his lugubrious analysis of the situation. . . . "Old Jerry Carpin's so direfully unfunny," he complained. "He spends all his time worrying over political questions these days. He takes in a dreadful paper called the *Economist*, without a thing in it, and he's got a bee in his bonnet about 'Social Credit.' Mad entirely! . . . He had a fine row last night with Derek, who swears by the Russian Bolshies. . . . But it means that Jerry never gets beyond that old kitchen sketch!"

"It's clean!" declared Nita, but he interrupted her.

"People down south are too sophisticated for that stuff. I begged Vincent to let me do my night-of-the-honeymoon sketch instead."

"That sketch is beneath you, Jack!"

"Why? It's absolutely harmless . . . unless the audience have dirty minds . . . which, thank Heaven, they usually have!" he added in an undertone.

"What did you say, Jack?" asked Nita sharply. "Oh, damn! that bus is full too!"

"Tisn't worth taking a bus now. I was going to say, why can't Vincent at any rate put back my restaurant sketch?"

"Because it stopped the show at King's Lynn, and he and Jerry Carpin were so jealous——"

"Well, it *was* something fresh . . . in a different style!"

"You certainly got a laugh when you soaked Gail in the custard."

"H'm, yes. But there were better things in it than that! But I suppose Jerry didn't have enough to do . . . and I ought to have brought Wanda in."

"I loathe her worse than I do Vincent!" declared Nita.

"Yet I think she means to be kind," pleaded Jack.

"To *you*, maybe! But she'd better stop putting her arm round you while you're both waiting to go on for the walk-down, or she'll hear from *me*!"

"Rot!" said Jack with a touch of complacency. "I'm not so Robert Taylor as all that!"

"Not by a long chalk, in my opinion! But these dirty-minded foreign women will go for anything . . . absolutely *anything* . . . in trousers!"

"Fear nothing!" Jack assured her. "Your husband may be surrounded by temptations——"

"Yes! The little besoms! If you didn't keep giving 'em chocolates, they wouldn't make passes at you."

"It keeps 'em in a good temper, and that means a lot to any stage-manager."

"Well, all I can say is that that Ilka had better be careful, for one! Some day she'll be caught out at her little games!"

"Pooh!" Jack sniggered. "She's far too clever. She's never been pinched yet—"

"And just you try it . . . just once . . . Mr Jack Kelham!" menaced his wife.

"My dear! You torment yourself with vain dreams!" answered Jack, with a touch of melancholy. "Ilka to me is just a great little artist; and, incidentally, Vincent might do worse than bring her out in her 'Dance of the Last Veil.'"

"Jack! Do you mean to tear it?"

"Nita! How *could* you?"

"You know what I mean! . . . Don't let me hear another word about that young woman! As if we hadn't enough to worry us with not being paid . . . and the rain . . . and digs where she keeps fowls in the attic. . . ."

"Good God! . . . I *thought* there was a smell!"

"What did you think it was, then? Parma violets? . . . Anyway, I can't stand much more . . . for one week!"

"All the same," said Jack gloomily, as they turned off the front into the street where the Silver Pavilion, in its usual flaking winter condition, confronted the squalls like an aged clown in the doldrums; "all the same, I've an ugly hunch that Vincent's going to ask the whole company to take a cut this week, till the business gets better."

"Well, you won't stand for that, will you, Jack?" demanded Nita, marching in front of him up the narrow passage to the stage-door.

"Well!" Her husband looked profoundly judicial. "That's a matter that calls for very careful thought."

"Why?" asked Nita. "I say, why, Jack?" she repeated, turning round.

Jack was not at her heels. He was standing at the entry to the passage, glaring at a bill of the show by the pit doors. "Nita!" he bellowed. "L-look! L-l-look at this!" And he pointed a trembling finger at the bill.

Nita ran to his side and uttered what was almost a scream. "Billed you in the smallest type of all!" she cried, clasping her hands and dropping her bag.

"They'll be c-calling me 's-s-supporting v-v-variety' next!" spluttered Jack.

"Well, you won't stand for THAT, at any rate, will you?"

"Stand for it!" he roared with blood-injected eyes. "Come with me and see!"

He rushed along the passage, and in at the stage-door, his face grim with purpose. But just inside the theatre he was checked by the sight of

a fresh-looking square of paper on the red-baize notice-board. Its type-written message was terse:

"Owing to unforeseen circumstances, I regret to have to announce termination of the tour at close of the present week."

"(Signed) VINCENT GYNN."

Jack Kelham's body as he read jerked, as though a bullet had been shot into it.

"What is it? What is it?" panted Nita at his elbow. "Oh, God!" she groaned as she read the notice in her turn. "I said I couldn't stand any more this week!"

"He can't do this! He can't do this to me!" said Jack in a small voice that he had hoped would come out big.

"He *has* done it," answered Nita, "and you'll never get the better of him!"

"He swore to me," protested Jack, "that he had twelve weeks fixed! We've worked just four of 'em!"

"All the shows are fixed up for the spring now," wailed Nita. "Oh, *why* didn't we try to get in with Bobo?"

"For Heaven's sake shut up about Bobo, Nita! It's the one bright spot that she's as far away as Glasgow! . . . Anyhow, don't worry, dear! I had a letter from Isidore Raymond last week about a shop after Easter. . . . Didn't I show it to you?"

"No, you did *not*! . . . I know you mean to be kind, Jack, but what's the use of putting on that act? . . . Oh, dear, I do wish you hadn't got Mother on your hands at this time!"

"I tell you, fear nothing! We'll get something better than this, almost at once. . . . This was never the show for us! . . . But anyhow, that man owes us a fortnight's salary in lieu of notice!"

"What's it all about?" asked a voice behind them. Jack looked round and saw Derek wrapped in his fine new tweed overcoat.

"Get a load of this!" he said, tapping the termination notice with his finger.

"Good God!" said Derek cynically, but without apparent emotion. "Gail!"

"What is it, dear?" enquired Gail, drifting along the passage from the door. She looked considerably less glamorous than Peter Warner had ever seen her, for she had not bothered to put on any street make-up, and was huddled into a drab mackintosh, with a hood concealing her hair. She carried a stumpy umbrella with a coral ring in its handle.

"We're out—both of us!" her husband informed her brutally.

"Out? What do you mean?" she demanded. "We can't be put out. We're signed up for the run!"

"The show's folded up—as I've been telling you it would. If you'd

just listened to me at Brighton! The only wonder in my view is that the audiences haven't killed us all before this!"

"What do you mean, Mr Vortigern?" Nita flared up. "There's been nothing wrong with my Jack's act, I can assure you! It's refined . . . and entertaining! It's your for-ever-unfinished symphonies that have been killing the customer!"

"You needn't let your hair down, Nita!" said Derek with a scowl. "I was referring to the way our programme has been thrown together . . . and to the material we've had to work with. But I presume we shan't stand for *this*?" He pointed to the notice. "It stinks of bogus!"

There was an angry, uneasy murmur behind him. Other members of the company had been coming in during the last few minutes, and the corridor was now almost impassable for the crowd. Varying opinions were heard. "Sickening, isn't it, girls?" declared Wilfred, the female impersonator. "Mean!" said a woman's voice. "What's the old devil playing at?" "What about our notices?" "Send in a round-robin!" "Wire to Equity!" came a confused clamour. Then there was an awkward silence as they looked at one another doubtfully, each waiting for somebody else to take the lead—and commit himself.

Suddenly a shrill voice cut the tension. "I'd like to knock his block off!" it proclaimed. "That's what I'll do! Knock the breezer's block off!"

"Pipe down, Ernie!" Wheeler, one of the midget's six-foot partners, admonished him apprehensively. "We don't want any violence here!"

Ernie was about to retort when Wheeler nudged him. Vincent Gynn stood in the doorway from the street, accompanied by Jerry Carpin, the *Economist* under his arm, his heavy cheeks drooping more than ever. The manager glowered for a moment on the assembly; then pushed through them without a word, and, still attended by the comic, went into his room and shut the door.

"Poor old Vincentio!" said Jack Kelham, who had followed him with compassionate eyes. "You can see he takes it hard! It's worse for him than for any of us, you know."

There was a dissenting murmur, during which Nita urged her husband to go in and speak to the manager. "It's your place to!" she said. Jack demurred; but at last agreed and knocked on Mr Gynn's door. It was opened a crack, and then, when it was seen who had knocked, thrown wide to admit him. The others stood about outside, looking at the door and its secrets in silence, until the late arrival of the Indian magician, upon whom everybody turned to inform him with zest of his good fortune. He replied with a torrent of Hindustani—at least, it is to be hoped for his credit that, with so many ladies present, it was in that language he was speaking.

After about ten minutes, the manager's door opened and Jack Kelham came forth smiling. "It's all right, dear," he said, going up to his wife. "He'll do it."

"You mean he'll pay?" asked Nita, brightening.

"Oh, that!" said Jack, looking rather confused. "I wasn't thinking of that—for the moment. I mean, it's all right about the billing. It was a blunder of the printers; Vincent apologized and promises that——"

"What does it matter about the billing *now*?" Nita stamped her foot. "What'll he do about the salaries?"

"Well, actually," confessed Jack, "I didn't like to raise that point—at the moment. Old Vincent's in the *hades* of a mess, and it hardly seemed cricket to——"

He stopped as the manager's door opened and Vincent came out, still attended by Jerry Carpin.

"Now look here, boys and girls," said Vincent, "it's not a bit of use you hanging around until you find yourselves off for the opening! I'm sorry about this, but I just couldn't carry on any longer. You've all seen what the business has been like since we started out, and I can't get money from the air as our friend here does. Even he couldn't do it off the stage, you know!"

"What's the business got to do with us?" interrupted Derek harshly. "Our point is that you're bound to pay us a fortnight's money, if you close down like this. Isn't that so?"

He looked round the gathering for support, but nobody dared to give a clear adhesion, except Ernie, who piped out, "Hear, hear! I'm with you, Derek!"

"You neither of you know what you're talking about," said Vincent Gynn smoothly. "I advise you both to read your agreements again." He turned to the comic. "Isn't what I say right, Jerry?" he asked.

"Dead right, guv'nor," replied Carpin. "It's no use havin' a fuss, boys and girls! You just got to make the best of it!"

"One can see he's squared *you*, at any rate!" sneered Derek.

"Hadn't you better be careful what you say?" demanded Vincent menacingly. "That is, if you hope to find *any* manager to engage you again!"

Derek answered with a contemptuous look, and began to work his way to the back of the crowd.

"I refuse to discuss the matter any further now," announced Vincent, pushing home his victory. "I'll see you all on Friday, and you can trust me to—to—be perfectly fair. So run along and get dressed. Anybody who's off will hear from me in a very different tone!"

There was a scraping of feet, as though the assemblage were on the point of dispersal when a girl's voice spoke. "Just a minute!" said Gail. "I've something to say!"

Everyone stared at her in surprise. She had pushed her way to the front, and now stood, with a natural flush on her un-rouged cheeks and her hands clenched on the stumpy umbrella.

"Now, what's the meaning of this, Gail?" Vincent began to bluster

"It means just this, Mr Gynn," she answered, pointing the umbrella at him. "I'm going to have my fortnight's money; so is Derek . . . and so are all the rest of us here! We'll have it in writing from you *now*, or you won't ring up to-night. Because I won't go on else . . . nor will any of you, will you, boys and girls? You'll support me, won't you? It's your bread-and-butter, and your families'—those of you who have any family!"

There was a second's pause, and then a murmur, most disquieting to the manager's ears, ran through the company. It sounded like an assent, only half-hearted so far, perhaps, but . . .

"Look here, Gail!" he said. "You can't talk like this to my artists!"

"Can't I, Vincent Gynn? We'll see! I'll say it all over again from the beginning, if you want me to!"

But there was something in her bearing that had put courage into her hesitant listeners. "You don't need to say it again, Gail!" cried one. "We're with you!" shouted another. "Pay or strike!" called a third, while Ernie flung his broad-brimmed bowler into the air with a screech of defiance. This was followed by a fusillade of clapping.

Jerry Carpin plucked at the manager's sleeve. "Better agree, Vincent!" he said, his face twitching nervously. "The show must go on, y'know!"

"You mean," Gail pounced upon him, "that you're afraid Equity might hear about it! . . . It would stink pretty badly, wouldn't it, if they did? . . . Now, do you accept our terms, Mr Gynn?"

"D—d if I do! It's sheer blackmail!" roared the manager.

"Then, boys and girls, it's an evening off for us!"

"Wait a bit!" cried Vincent agitatedly. "If you insist . . . it's an outrage . . . but I'd rather die than disappoint my public . . . Very well, then, a fortnight's money for everybody!"

"You're all witnesses," declared Gail, "so we'll let him off putting it in writing. . . . That's all, I think," and she walked quietly off to her room. Suddenly the company began to cheer, and the cheering went on until she was out of sight. It was the most successful scene she had ever played so far.

"Why didn't you do that?" demanded Nita of Jack when they were alone together in their room, while he hurriedly made up and jerked himself into his evening dress. "It was your place to represent the company. Why did you let that girl get away with it?"

"On the contrary. It's my place, as stage-manager, to represent the people who pay me."

"That's just the point, Jack! Can't you see, Jack, that they *don't* pay you?"

"I'm employed by Mr Gynn," insisted Jack, "to look after his interests, not to work against them."

"I see. And you can't get beyond that?"

"Why should I try? There's no sense in it. None of this crowd have done themselves any good by their performance to-night. Gail will find that out soon enough when she has to look for another shop. It gets round among the managers, you know, a thing like trying to start a strike!"

"And if Equity says that we were right?"

"That's not my business. My business is to look after the interests of——"

"Oh, forget it!" said Nita wearily. "You've only about three ideas in your head, so I suppose you can't afford to lose one of 'em. . . . Put that tie of yours straight! D'you want to go on the stage looking like a bum?"

Jack went along with an aggrieved air to the side of the stage, where he tried to pacify the Indian magician, who was stalking up and down with a cigarette between his lips, still expressing himself in dialect. Presently the fireman came up and tapped him on the shoulder. "Can't you read?" he asked, pointing to a large notice on the whitewashed wall "NO SMOKING."

"Whatja mean?" demanded the Indian haughtily. "I can read as well as you! . . . And anyway, 'oo's spittin'?"

"You were wonderful!" Derek was saying meanwhile ironically to Gail in their room, as she too hurried through her dressing and making-up. "I couldn't tell whether you looked most like St. Joan or one of the Edwardian suffragettes, demanding votes for women. Perhaps the umbrella went best with that."

"Well," retorted Gail out of a cloud of powder, "I got you your money, didn't I?"

"You did," he agreed. "You're a good little girl and shall have a sweetie. What about going out to supper somewhere to-night to celebrate?"

"She's cooking that fish—it will be off by to-morrow, if we don't eat it. Besides, what is there to celebrate in our being out of a shop?"

"Yes," he assented, his mercurial temperament dropping at once. "We're in one hell of a mess, I must say! What a pity you had to refuse that chap Du Parc's offer in favour of this!"

Gail spun round furiously in her chair. "Must you go on everlastingly about that? . . . I tell you, it was a try-on . . . a trap! . . . It might have kept me down for years, being tied to Fizz on those terms! . . . Don't you care anything for my position, Derek?"

"Oh, Gawd, your 'position' again! Give us a rest from that for a little while, my dear! We can't eat your ruddy position, you know!"

"Then why don't you write something that will help us to eat?"

"Because it's bad for any author's soul . . . that's a meaningless

word; bad for his organism, I should say . . . to write down to *any* public. It paralyses his intelligent responses."

"What a lot of big words you have for idleness, haven't you?"

"Look at that watch! You'll be off, if you're not careful, *breadwinner!*" he sneered.

She glanced at her watch on the table, a pretty little jewelled thing which she had hitherto managed to prevent Derek from including in his periodical visits to the pawnbroker. With an exclamation she snatched up a basket of artificial flowers and rushed out of the room.

Left to himself, Derek, with a reflective, chewing motion of his jaws, picked up the watch and examined it. He opened the back and looked at the markings; then held it close to the mirror-lights to note the flash of the gems. He considered a moment, holding it in his palm, then with a shrug and a sigh laid it down again and began to pace the room. A footstep was heard in the passage, and with a nervous movement he replaced the watch exactly where Gail had left it, leaning against the bottom of the mirror. But the step was not that of his wife returning, and he continued his restless prowling. At last, grinding out the end of his cigarette with a decisive movement, he dived for a dressing-case in the corner, and pulled out a writing-pad with envelopes. Then, taking his fountain-pen from his jacket-pocket hanging on a peg, he seated himself at the table and began to write:

"DEAR MR DU PARC, . . ."

When he had done he sealed the envelope, looked at the watch, and saw he had just time before he went on to drop the letter into the pillar-box opposite the stage-door, to catch the last post.

When Monty Du Parc received the letter the next morning in his beautiful room at All-Star House, he smiled like a kindly uncle and pressed his desk-bell. "Miss Serle," he cooed, when the secretary answered, "send somebody across, will you, to buy me a bunch of those early primroses they're selling round the fountain in the Circus—here's the money! It seems a pity, doesn't it, not to brighten up the room all we can on such a lovely morning? I think the spring's here! . . . Oh, and by the way," he added, "you might get me out a C3 Contract Form . . . You know, the one we sent to Miss Gail Darien in December which she declined. . . . Yes, you *must* remember! Don't let the grass grow now! . . . Oh! and when you've done that, get me Joseph Stulitzer, the agent, on the phone!"

III

At Hastings on the Friday morning that week Mr Vincent Gynn interviewed the members of his company one by one, cajoling, blustering, and pulling out the pathetic stop by turns, in a last effort to induce them (despite his formal promise) to forgo their fortnight's money, or at least some part of it.

Nita Kelham waited in the dressing-room she shared with Jack nearby, in company with Wilfred and Ernie the midget. "That old villain," she lamented, "is going to try every trick he knows to get out of his obligation."

"I shall be very cross if he tries it on me!" declared Wilfred.

"What I'm afraid of is Jack," said Nita. "He'll fall for any hard-luck story!"

"But that's what's so lovable in your husband," squeaked the midget.

"Let me tell you, Ernie," said Nita, "that if you were Jack's wife, you wouldn't find it so very lovable!"

"Oh, come, there are other things besides money in the world, Mrs K.!" protested the midget.

"Luckily! We'd look a pretty strip-tease if there weren't!" sighed Nita.

"Naughty!" said Wilfred, shaking his finger at her. "Ah! I think I heard the old man calling me!" He picked up his exquisite golden velours hat and walked out of the room, followed by Ernie, who reached up to press Nita's hand encouragingly in both his own before going.

A few minutes later Jack came charging into the room in his hat and overcoat. "Not late, am I?" he gasped. "The car lay down at that gradient by Warrior Square, I can't imagine why; and a d—— interfering rozzer wouldn't let me park it on the spot. I had to push it a mile to a car park. Honestly, I wouldn't bring a car on tour ever, if it wasn't so convenient having it always to take you anywhere."

"Jack!" Nita seized the lapels of his coat. "When Vincent calls you in, you *must* be firm! You understand?"

"Of course, I shall be! I haven't been in the business all these years to swallow any of his sob-stuff, I can tell you! . . . D'you think I've time to run round to the laundry about that shirt of mine, before I see Vincent?"

"No, you haven't! You wait here!" replied Nita inexorably.

"All right! . . . Did you tell the butcher about that piece of steak?"

"I made him take it back, and give me another—a nice big one!"

"Grand! We can have it for lunch, then."

"You don't get it unless you stand up to Vincent . . . that's a warning, my boy!"

"Nita, I pledge you my word I'm not only going to get every penny of salary that's due to us both, I'm going to make him pay back that two quid he borrowed at King's Lynn!"

"You lent him two pounds? Why on earth——"

"He asked me. How could I help saying yes?"

"Search me! A psycho-analyst might tell you!"

"Are you there, Jack?" called Vincent Gynn's voice, fruity and genial, from the door of his room.

"Oh!" said Nita, clasping her hands as Jack went off. "I'd pray, if I could remember anything but Abanazar's curse in the cave!"

After an unending wait, during which the cold of the little dressing-room, with its frosted windows looking out on to an area-pit of concrete, seemed to strike up through her toes to her heart, she heard an outburst of cheerful laughter at the end of the passage. "So long, then, Jack!" Vincent called, and his footsteps died out along the corridor to the street. Nita turned, breathlessly awaiting Jack. He seemed a long while coming; then a sound was heard as of some large body being dragged along the passage, and he appeared, tugging by the handle a long cabin-trunk of dented leather.

"What the devil——" began Nita.

"Just a minute," said Jack, letting the end of the trunk fall with a thump just inside the room, and mopping his forehead. "Don't you remember admiring this trunk in Vincent's room?"

"Perhaps I did, but what about our money, Jack?"

"Oh, that's all right! He paid in full."

"Every penny?"

"Every penny! . . . Here's his cheque!"

"Cheque?" enquired Nita suspiciously. "Why didn't he give you the cash as usual?"

"Well, he explained he hadn't the cash in hand to meet all these unexpected claims to-day, so he's asking a few of the leading people to take cheques."

"And where do we cash this?"

"Well, we can't cash it just yet. You see, it's post-dated seven days——"

"But, Jack, whatever are we going to do till then? . . . And where can we get hold of Vincent after we've broken up if—if——"

"You needn't be afraid of that! It'll be honoured all right!"

"We hope," said Nita resignedly. "Now what's this about the trunk? What are you doing with it?"

"Well, it was like this, old girl. Vincent happened to remind me that you said the other night how you'd love a trunk like this to carry your evening dresses without crushing. He doesn't need it any longer, so he gave me the chance of buying it from him."

"For how much?" asked Nita faintly.

"Three quid, which I thought was dirt cheap, considering. . . . So . . . I bought it."

"Oh yes," said Nita, "you bought it all right! . . . He gives you a post-dated, probably stumer, cheque . . . and you pay him out of your pocket for this b-beastly, g-great sar-sarcophagus that we don't need——"

"But, Nita," he cried in dismay, "I thought you'd like it!"

"Oh, I can like it! . . . Sure, I can like it! . . . Go away!" she sobbed, as he tried to put his arm round her.

"Don't take it so hard, old girl! . . . Aren't you feeling the thing? . . . I know, you didn't eat any breakfast! I saw you refuse your egg. . . . Wish I'd refused mine, come to that. . . . Look, let's have a quick one, and get back to lunch. There'll be the steak!"

Nita stood up, putting away her handkerchief. "No steak do you get for lunch to-day, Mr Jack Kelham!" she said. "You can buy yourself a Welsh rabbit or sardine on toast at the café . . . and you can like that, you great boob, you!"

Despite the adroitness with which he had skinned Jack Kelham, it was but a woebegone Vincent Gynn who sat a little later in a neighbouring bar with Jerry Carpin.

"I'm sorry to let you in for this, Jerry," he said. "But I really had no choice in the matter."

"Oh! I don't bear you any malice," grunted the comic. They were old fellow-trouper, who had been through much together and in their time done each other many a good turn (and many a shabby one). "After all," pursued Jerry, "you paid *me* my fortnight all square . . . and it wasn't doing me any good going on with a show like this, you know."

"Jerry, how can you say that?" protested Vincent, cut to the heart.

The comedian shrugged his shoulders. "Anyhow," he said, drinking, "my agent can always fix me up a good run of dates. He says I've got something no other comic has."

"That would be Dan Leno's gag-book, wouldn't it?" said Vincent, with a gleam of his tusks. But as Jerry Carpin received this humour only with a look of dull resentment, he went on hastily, "The business has been shocking, as you know. Seems to me, Jerry, people don't want a refined, artistic little show these days. They demand glitter . . . bang . . . Fizz, in short!"

Jerry Carpin nodded. "Something in that," he admitted. "But what I don't see is why you didn't hold on a bit. Things would have picked up as soon as we got North."

"I dare say they would," agreed Vincent. "But I was let down . . . and I expect you can guess who it was did it?"

Carpin nodded understandingly.

"I wish," went on Vincent in a vicious outburst, "I'd never met that chap . . . I do indeed, Jerry! But what with taking loans from him and renewing 'em . . . and giving him a cut in the show this time and a bigger one the next . . . well, it had really become his show more than mine, I reckon. I wired him on Monday to know if he would send me a cheque to meet my salary bill this week-end and tide me through generally, which he's done more than once before, mark you, and very much to his advantage! But this time

he just wired back 'Close down immediately,' so what could I do? The only alternative was to risk mine and Wanda's little savings, which it wasn't to be expected we should do, was it? . . . Besides, I don't want to get out with Mr You-Know-Who. For one thing, I expect he'll give me a start again this summer . . . and for another . . . well . . . he's a coming man. I'm told he's likely to go on to the directorate of Fizz before the year's out."

"Not a chap *I'd* care to quarrel with," agreed the comic. "Let me see . . . it is your turn, isn't it, Vincent?"

Vincent reluctantly ordered the next round. "I wish, all the same," he grumbled, "I knew what his game really is. . . . I've a hunch it's something to do with that girl Gail Darien. He wrote me a furious letter at the start for engaging her without consulting him first. . . . But I told him engaging the company would be my job so long as I ran a show. . . . All the same, I wish to God I'd never set eyes on her! . . . Nothing but trouble she's led me into, first and last!" He fell into a gloomy silence, from which he emerged to say with decision, "Your turn *this* time, Jerry!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

As Peter, in honour of his expected guests, put on a fresh shirt and changed his tie in the bedroom of his flat in Chelsea, he reflected on the labour involved in giving even the smallest party. "Cocktails 5.30 to 7.0" was all he had dared to plan; he had not invited a crowd; and the preparations were not sumptuous. Yet all the day up to four o'clock seemed to have been occupied by the cutting of sandwiches, the setting-out of the small sausage rolls and dishes of olives, the polishing of glasses (and borrowing of extra ones), the brewing of coffee for any guests who might be water-wagoners, the shifting of furniture to make more room.

Peter had furniture now, and a monthly H.P. bill for it as well as for the piano and the radiogram, and one of these three he usually forgot to pay, so that he lived in an atmosphere of grave remonstrance faintly tinged with menace. He could manage when he could remember; but he had once or twice thought with a sigh that it would be pleasant to be able to pay for things outright with substantial royalty cheques on his songs—and they would have been pretty substantial by now, he had gathered, from a chat with a music seller in Charing Cross Road and some remarks made to him in a tube train by an envious composer of his acquaintance. However, he reminded himself at such moments that he mustn't grumble because he couldn't have it both ways; he had taken the risk of accepting a salary from Melodeon instead of royalties.

A wash in cold water invigorated him; though the chill of his bedroom made him close the window, through which a grey river-mist from the Embankment at the foot of the little stucco street was insinuating its fingers. When he crossed the passage into the good-sized Victorian double drawing-room which was his, he was pleased to see the fire burning cheerfully, though, as the opposite houses were now dimming to ghosts, he began to fear that the fog might keep some of his guests away.

The front-door bell rang, and he went down and opened to Beryl, looking, he thought, unexpectedly magnificent in wine-coloured velvet and a beret of a matching shade. But she was doing well, he knew, having, on Les Linacre's warm recommendation, got into the orchestra of one of Isidore Raymond's shows, and by her own efforts also into a first-class Chamber Music quartet that gave fairly frequent concerts. How far she had got over the wound of Zharkov's behaviour he could not guess; he only knew that the *maestro* had at the moment taken up with an Argentine cabaret singer.

Peter might with advantage have greeted his sister with, "How lovely you're looking, Beryl!" instead of fraternally remarking, "Hulloa! You're early!" Perhaps, even, some complications in his life might have been avoided if he had thus sweetened her temper on her arrival this unsmiling March afternoon. As it was, she retorted to his greeting, "I came to see what kind of a mess you were making of everything; but maybe you'd like me to wait on the Embankment till the quality arrive?"

"Don't be silly!" he said, kissing her affectionately, but without response. "I'm glad you've come early; I'll get you, if you will, to pour out the coffee when it's wanted."

"No flowers!" said Beryl, entering the drawing-room and looking round. "You would forget them! Well!" she unwrapped a large paper she was carrying and displayed some fine parrot tulips. "I suppose you haven't any vases?" she asked.

"Oh, but I have though, in the pantry at the end of the passage! What gorgeous tulips, Ber! You're a love!"

"Nice to be welcome for *something*! If only Gail Darien appreciates them, you'll feel repaid for my trouble in getting them, won't you?"

"Don't be prickly, old girl! I'll fetch the vases, and while you arrange the flowers, I'll tell you who I expect."

"I might even guess. Miss Gail Darien, the great soprano . . . and Miss Darien!"

"And Mrs Derek Vortigern," he laughed. "And Mr Vortigern!"

"No? So the husband's with her for once, is he? We shall see the big, bad wolf at last!"

"Yes," called Peter from behind a curtain at the end of the passage, where he was putting water in the vases. "She's got a week out with *Spotlights* before going to Wolverhampton, and he's in London out of a job as usual. So they're both able to come." Peter returned to the drawing-room with the vases.

"Then," remarked Beryl, shortening a tulip stalk, "she had to go into that show in spite of all the fuss she made?"

"I'm afraid so. Vincent Gynn dried up on her, and *Spotlights* was the only thing that offered at the moment. They were taking a girl out of it to go to the St. Andrew's, so they fitted Gail in, although the tour had started. Derek, I fancy, insisted she should accept."

"Tough guy, eh?"

"Tough? No! Inflated! . . . Well, you'll see him for yourself, soon."

"I can wait. . . . I suppose there'll be somebody else besides the Vortigerns?"

"Plenty . . . I hope. There's Les Linacre for one. You do like him, at any rate."

"How you love making me out the perfect hedgehog, don't you, Peter?" said Beryl with her brown eyes flaming.

"Oh no!" laughed Peter, thinking that she really did look remarkably attractive this afternoon. "You like people when you *do* like them. When you don't . . . well, you let 'em know it! Gail just couldn't imagine what she had done to annoy you at the party before she went North with *Spotlights*. She said she'd hoped you were going to make friends with her."

"Here we are again! 'The music goes round and around,' doesn't it? You really should take up crosswords or football pools or something, for an occasional change!"

"Sorry!" said Peter penitently. "Well, I was telling you who's coming this afternoon. There'll be several theatre people, some of whom you probably know. . . . Yes! There's Gay Warrinder, the contralto, who sings 'Dreaming I Waltz with You' on the wireless. . . . There's Harington, the head of Melodeon, my employer. I'm a trifle flattered he thought it worth his while to accept! . . . Two or three of these literary wenches. . . . Halim the violinist and his French wife . . . Wake, the critic of the *Musical Herald* . . . a couple of the boys from the old *Gazette* . . . oh yes, and Athelstan Rigglesworth invited himself . . . not that I wasn't glad to have him." He just stopped himself in time from adding, "I want him to meet Gail."

"If Athelstan's coming," said Beryl, "nobody had better let down their hair or break the elastic of their knickers, or there'll be spiteful pars in to-morrow's 'Diary,' won't there? . . . Who else?"

"Let me think. . . . There's Jack and Nita Kelham; I don't believe you've met them, but they're troupers! Out of a shop unluckily, since Vincent Gynn twisted them with the others, last month. Monty Du Parc was mad about that business—one of the dirtiest tricks he'd ever heard of, he said. . . . Monty might look in himself; but he's terribly driven just now."

"Too much happiness for us, if he did, I suppose!" Beryl broke off the last tulip-stalk viciously. "He hates himself these days, your Mr Du Parc, doesn't he? I met him at a party last Sunday, and he was too upstage for words. I loathe dagoes in brilliantine, anyway."

"Monty isn't a dago, Beryl!"

"I can scent it, whatever he says."

"Well, he's getting to be a pretty big man, you know. I hear that he's definitely going on the directorate of Fizz. There's been a big reconstruction there this month. . . ."

II

Peter was quite right. The expenses involved in acquiring the Parthenope (which needed redecorating and the modernization of its stage before it could be considered "Fizz-worthy," as Athelstan Rigglesworth put it), coupled with the heavy losses on *I Like You, Lady!* (which had flopped too badly to make a provincial tour worth while),

had brought the affairs of the syndicate to a crisis. New money was needed, and, on the principle of preferring the known and more or less measurable evil, Bob Forshaw had invited Zaleski to join with him in putting it up. Zaleski, however, refused to part unless the nominal share capital of the company was raised from its original £12,000 to £15,000, of which total £8,000 was to be allotted to the Chairman, in place of his former £7,000, and to Zaleski £5,000 in place of his existing £3,000—a large jump in voting power, which Bob Forshaw acquiesced in without joy. But Mr Zaleski had several times declared in the plainest terms that this was in his view “ein completely inerrable bollity,” and there was no answer to *that*. Still, with Zharkov and Inman still limited to their holdings of £1,000 each, Bob securely retained his control over the syndicate; and on reflection he even thought it worth while to make a small paring off his margin by ceding a hundred shares to Monty Du Parc. He was aware that Monty expected to be rewarded for having put him in the way of leasing the Parthenope over Inman’s presumptuous head, and he was beginning to estimate Monty’s value as a supporter more accurately than he had done before.

Peter Warner had never seen these figures, and perhaps the reader will object to being bored with them. But this book, dealing as it does with the art of the theatre, would be woefully wanting if no attempt were made to set out the balance of power within Fizz according to the best arithmetic the author can command.

This accomplished, return may be made to Peter’s rooms, where the front-door bell has just sounded again. While Beryl went along to the pantry to see to the coffee, Peter ran down to open. There, shaming the melancholy mist, was Gail in the black hat with the blue feathers, and there was Derek, his coat-collar up, and his muffler drawn tight as if in protest against being dragged out in such weather.

“Knock! Knock!” said Gail, smiling.

“Who’s there?” answered Peter.

“Gail!”

“Gail who?”

“Gail Warning, obviously! . . . So be careful!”

They laughed, and Peter led the way upstairs.

“Glorious flowers!” said Gail on entering the drawing-room.

“I told you we’d be here hours before anybody,” grumbled Derek.

“What a nice large room you have, Peter!” continued Gail, disregarding her husband.

“Made for a Victorian family circle, you know,” said Peter. “I sometimes feel it’s faintly sighing for an Ottoman, a round table on a pillar, and a family album, and I hope it forgives my Degas prints and my Heal furniture!”

“And your radiogram!” said Gail, walking over to examine the instrument. “What a grand set!”

"Isn't it?" said Peter enthusiastically, picking up a copy of *World Radio* from a record-cabinet beside it. "The other night I tried how many foreign stations I could get on it. I forget the exact figure now, but it was astonishing!"

"You a radio fan, then?"

"Always have been rather. . . . This is the first set," he patted it lovingly, "that I haven't had to make myself. Though I usen't to do so badly. I believe I'd have been quite good at gadgets if I'd been brought up that way."

"Everybody nowadays," observed Derek, "seems to have that bust of Beethoven over your bookcase there. Isn't it time we got beyond Beethoven?"

Peter smiled vaguely. "What'll you drink?" he asked. "Sherry, cocktail, whisky?"

"Straight gin for me, thanks," answered Derek, running his eye over Peter's books and turning away with a pitying expression. He took the glass Peter offered him, and setting it down on the top of the piano, where it made a wet ring on the polish, opened the lid and tried the tone of the instrument.

Gail meanwhile was lifting the net-curtain over the window in the back drawing-room and trying to peer out through the mist. "Got a garden, too, Peter?" she asked.

"One better hidden," he laughed, bringing her the sherry for which she had asked. "How's the show going?"

She answered with a little grimace, and turned the subject. "How's your music for Blackpool going?" she enquired.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm rather in the dark about it. Last month they commissioned me through Monty to write a couple of songs. I did them and sent them in, and have heard nothing since."

"Nice songs?" asked Gail, a shade wistfully.

"It doesn't look as though you'd be singing them," answered Peter, "so what the hell?"

She turned from him and seemed again to be trying to get a glimpse of the garden.

While they stood talking there Derek watched them, from time to time striking soft chords on the piano. But as they soon turned away from the window and no longer presented their backs to him, he could find no grounds for suspicion; and presently, letting down the lid of the piano with a carelessness that jarred every string, he strolled over to the table in search of cigarettes. He inspected the box of Virginians; then pushed it contemptuously aside and took one of the Turkish. He had just lit it, and Peter in the back room was showing Gail Degas's ballerina in pink, when the door opened a little way and swung to again, producing a clash of cups and an exclamation in the passage.

Derek stepped to the door and opened it. Outside was a tall girl

in red, who had been trying to manœuvre a tray with a coffee-pot and cups through the door in vain.

"Hulloa!" said Derek. "What's the trouble?"

"This coffee! I've spilt the d—d stuff!"

"What sap wants coffee at this time of day?"

"Search me! . . . Here, hold this tray, will you? There's some milk on my skirt, blast it!"

She transferred the tray to Derek's awkward keeping, and wiped a fleck or two of milk off the wine-coloured velvet with her handkerchief. Derek's eye followed the direction of her hand appreciatively, from her waist down her well-formed leg to her shining patent shoe. Then he let it travel upwards to meet her glowing brown eyes.

"Peter told me to bring that stuff in," she said. "Here, I'll take the tray again!"

"No, no!" replied Derek with a toothy smile. "Just tell me where it belongs! . . . You're Beryl Warner, of course, the harp-player; my wife has met you. I'm Derek Vortigern. . . . What about letting the coffee-stall mind itself now, while I find you a drink?"

As he went towards the table where the drinks were set up, there was a ring at the door-bell below. "Host! Host!" he called out to Peter reprovingly, and as Peter hurried out of the back room, "I'll get Miss Warner a cocktail, my dear chap," he said importantly; "you go and let in your guests—they seem to be coming in swarms!"

The bell, indeed, had rung again, and presently Peter returned with Les Linacre the conductor, and three or four others, including Jack and Nita Kelham.

"How do you do, Beryl?" said Les, smiling at her where she stood by the corner of the piano in talk with Derek. "All well at the Duke's? . . . Good! . . . Hulloa, Gail! is it you . . . ?"

As usual on these occasions, there was a sudden rush of comers after a long wait, and Peter was kept busy running down to the door and returning to look after his visitors' wants. He distributed enquiries and drinks at random, then dashed down in answer to a ring like a postman's, to find Athelstan Rigglesworth waiting on the mat.

"I don't suppose you have any whisky?" he growled, as Peter showed him into the drawing-room. He did not seem to be in an amiable temper. "Who are all these people?" he asked loudly. "Never saw any of them in my life!"

Peter hastened to the table to pour him a large double whisky, and on his return was relieved to find that he had fastened on Les Linacre. "Your band's all right," he was saying, "but why do you deafen us with the brass?"

"I thought you liked to hear money talk, Athelstan!" laughed the conductor, and left the critic scowling.

More guests were heard at the door, and among them was Pamela Carraway, whose fame had been made at the age of eighteen by

an autobiography few had ever read, since it had been suppressed with *éclat* almost on the day of publication. After hearing Peter run through the drinks available, she demanded coffee—expecting there would be none.

"Coffee? Yes," said Peter. "I realized London was going sober and prepared accordingly." He looked round desperately for Beryl to aid him, but she was now almost hidden behind the piano in the corner, so deep with Derek that he did not dare to fish her up. He tried to get to the coffee-tray himself by edging round the crowd along the wall; but on the way ran into Jack Kelham, who was contemplating the books in the case and picking volumes out with a literary air so profound that it made Pamela ask jealously, "Who is he? What's he written?"

"Hulloa, Jack!" said Peter breathlessly. "Is nobody looking after you? . . . Just a minute! What'll you have?"

"Never mind me, old man!" replied Jack in an absorbed tone, bringing out a terrifying pair of glasses with wide shell wings and putting them on his nose.

"I'm sure I've seen him at the P.E.N. Club," murmured Pamela to her neighbour.

Peter poured out the coffee; then saw Wake, the bearded critic of the *Musical Herald*, bulkily approaching the cocktail tray. "Help yourself, do!" he shouted.

"Right!" answered Wake. "And shall I look after those ladies over there?"

"Please!"

Mr Wake at once transformed himself into the most genial of hosts, and won popularity throughout the room by the promptness of his service and the startling strength of the drinks he compounded.

III

"The piano?" Derek was saying meanwhile to Beryl. "It's too easy . . . as a career, I mean. I daresay I could have become a professional pianist and done as well as the next man, but strumming out other people's thoughts, that's not enough! . . . Gives one a maddening sense of frustration, too, after a while. I'm sure you've experienced that, Miss Warner?"

"Oh, I never claimed to be anything so exciting as a creative artist," answered Beryl, leaning back against the piano and smiling at him out of half-closed eyes.

"Really?" answered Derek, challenging her until she opened them to their full lustre again. "I could have sworn you had the spark in you."

She shook her head demurely. "No. Just a simple executant. No inspiration!"

"I don't think you're being quite fair to yourself," answered Derek. "I'm sure," he added, again achieving with difficulty his toothy smile, "I'm sure a girl like you could inspire *me*!"

Beryl raised mocking eyebrows. "You need to be inspired by a woman, then?"

"What man doesn't . . . if he's honest with himself?" He sighed. "Want of that, I believe, is what has held me back. I suppose every writer . . . every artist . . . who has the brains to see an inch or two ahead of his time needs a little understanding to back up his belief in himself. At any rate, I never was a hard-shell to that degree I could do without sympathy altogether."

"You write plays, don't you?" enquired Beryl. "It must be terribly interesting work. Creating one's own world of life!"

Derek shrugged. "It's a job with compensations . . . and sickening disappointments, too, Miss Warner."

"How disappointments? It must be a marvellous feeling, the urge to create."

"Not so marvellous, believe me, when your work comes back to you with the imbecile comments of the commercial manager. . . . How did you know I was a dramatist, anyway?"

"Peter told me."

"Good Lord! Did he remember it? I'm so used to being one of the back-of-the-drawer boys, I don't any longer expect anyone to have heard of me."

Beryl scanned him with her head on one side. "I shouldn't have taken you for the sort of man who lets himself get pushed to the back of the drawer," she said. "You strike me as . . . well . . . too dynamic."

Once more he produced his difficult smile. "So long as I don't strike you as allergic—" he told her in a low voice. "And I daresay I might have been the other thing if I'd had someone like you to believe in me, Miss Warner. You can't imagine . . . luckily for you . . . what it is to have a daily wet blanket to cope with!"

"Your wife," said Beryl, taking her cigarette from her lips.

"Eh?" He looked startled.

"Your wife, I was going to say, seems to be getting on very well with Athelstan Rigglesworth."

They both looked across to the inner drawing-room, where Gail stood listening with a constrained air to Athelstan. He appeared to be lecturing her, and scattered cigar-ash around him as he declaimed.

"Oh, Gail knows how to do her stuff—certainly," agreed Derek. And as Peter joined the group, smiling in an almost propitiatory way at Athelstan, to whom he handed a second large whisky, he added, "And she'll never lack men to help her either."

Beryl looked at Gail and at her brother, and that thin, ugly line came into her mouth. "Doesn't seem as if it would be right to inter-

rupt them, does it?" she asked. "I think I'll slip away without saying good-bye. I want to do some shopping before I go on to the theatre."

"I'll come with you, if I may," said Derek. "This kind of wild revel quickly palls . . . and Gail's going on alone from here, anyhow. We might share a taxi to Piccadilly, if we can find one."

"Chance is a great thing in a fog like this," replied Beryl, picking her fur off the top of the piano. "Probably every one will have been snapped up by now, but we can try. . . . Come along! Nobody will notice our flight!"

Nobody did; and as the two went down the chilly staircase, each was filled with a bitter sense of being unwanted that drew them together. Derek opened the front door, and they disappeared side by side into the mist.

IV

"Don't believe all that old Athelstan tells you," Peter said to Gail, after joining her *tête-à-tête* with the critic. "He fancies himself as a judge of music, and yet he thinks dirt of my stuff! What a taste—I ask you!"

"I was writing music criticism while you were still being rapped over the knuckles for mistakes at the piano!" growled Athelstan, whose morbid inferiority complex could not endure the faintest sally at his expense.

Peter hastened to correct his blunder. "And now *you* do the rapping, and we're all afraid of you!" he said. "But if you once heard Gail sing—well, you're far too good a judge, Athelstan, to go wrong about that! . . . Excuse me, won't you, both of you? I hear somebody downstairs."

It was Mr Harington, that unassuming little man, who seemed almost apologetic for giving his host the trouble of coming down to let him in.

"Disquieting, this, about Hitler taking over Austria, isn't it?" he chirruped as he followed Peter upstairs.

"Is it?" asked Peter vaguely. "I see the papers have been full of it, but I'm afraid I haven't properly taken it in. . . . What'll you drink?" he enquired as he led his guest into the drawing-room, now noisy with conversation and cloudy with cigarette-smoke.

Mr Harington hung back near the door, looking almost alarmed. "Drink?" he echoed. "Well, I don't generally at this time of day. . . . Well, yes, I'll have a very small sherry, if you'll be so kind. . . . Now, don't you worry about me," he said when Peter brought it. "You have all your other friends to look after. . . . By the way, any more news of *Blackpool Breezes*?"

"*Blackpool Breezes*?"

"Yes, I understand that's the title Fizz have finally chosen for the summer show. They mean to give it a topical character."

"Oh!" said Peter shortly. "They've told *me* nothing. I did those two numbers they commissioned, as you know, and since then I've simply been marking time, hoping to be called into conference."

"Oh, you will be, you will be!" declared Mr Harington reassuringly. "They have such a lot to think of, you know, when they're preparing a big show like this. . . . That waltz song you've done for the soprano is as catchy as 'Dreaming I Waltz with You.' We ought to do well with the dance records . . . I beg your pardon!"

He effaced himself as Pamela Carraway drifted up to Peter, holding an empty coffee-cup under his nose; she had secretly poured its contents into a black Wedgwood jar that stood on a table in the back room. "If there's no more coffee," she suggested sweetly, "I wouldn't say no to just the teeniest drop of gin!"

"Why, of course, forgive me," murmured Peter, taking the cup from her.

There was a little frown on his forehead as he went to fetch the gin for her. His few words with Mr Harington had stirred in him again the uneasy feeling he had now had for some months that everybody seemed to know more about his own business than he did. True, Harington was his publisher. But was that any reason why he and not the prospective composer should be told the title and character of the forthcoming revue at Blackpool? . . . And he hoped to do well with the dance records of Peter's new waltz song, did he? . . . No doubt he would! . . .

Still, if Fizz wanted to make Blackpool the theme of the show this year, what opportunities there would be! The very title that had been suggested, *Blackpool Breezes* . . . there was a dance in that! Peter had not been a devotee of Wally Montrose for so long without being alert to such a hint. But was he going to be asked to do the Blackpool numbers? Fizz must really put their cards on the table! Monty must be told to end the mystery act; there was not too much time, as it was.

"Warner seems struck all of a heap by your voice. Is it so wonderful?" asked Athelstan Rigglesworth, looking Gail up and down with his hungry, disappointed eyes, which somehow reminded her of the unsatisfied sadness that from time to time crept into Monty Du Parc's look.

"I'd like *you* to be the judge, Mr Rigglesworth," she answered lightly.

"Where do you sing?" Athelstan took a pull at the double whisky that Peter had brought him. "And how is it I've never heard you?"

"Well; the week after next I shall be singing at Wimbledon."

"Where's Wimbledon?" demanded Athelstan with a straight face, as he finished his whisky. "Won't they listen to you in London?"

"Nobody starts at the top," answered Gail, adding a little pink to the colour on her cheeks.

"Well, I hope you don't expect me to take a day's journey to—where is it? I'm a busy man, you know. I have a dozen letters on my desk this minute begging me to go and hear singers. I haven't even answered them."

Gail's colour deepened. "Seems as if I was an optimist, then," she said, forcing a laugh. "I beg your pardon." She turned her head away with a little cough as the smoke from his cigar filled her lungs. He blew another cloud over her.

"You realize, then, do you, that you'd be one of the lucky ones, if you were to sing to me?" he asked.

"I should think myself exceedingly lucky," she answered, controlling herself as she remembered how important this man's good-will could be to her.

"Well," he looked discontentedly into his empty glass, and muttered, "Where's that chap Warner? Hell of a host he is! . . . Well," he repeated, "I'll tell you what I'll do, and there's not many I'd do so much for, I can promise you! You can come to my flat one evening and sing to me there."

"That would be wonderful, Mr Rigglesworth!"

"You may not know it, but I've just finished a play of my own, a play for music. When it's produced it's going to surprise some people who say a critic can't do creative work. I'm looking for the right people to make up the cast. I don't want any of these old dray-horses neighing out my verses. I'm on the look-out for young, fresh voices. . . . Well, we shall see."

"When am I to come, Mr Rigglesworth? And I should like my husband to play my accompaniments?"

"You don't want an accompanist," said Athelstan emphatically.

"Oh, but I do indeed, Mr Rigglesworth!"

"Then you can't be much of a singer, that's all I can say. Anyhow, I don't keep a piano in my rooms."

"That's rather awkward," said Gail. "I don't quite see how——"

"Don't you want me to hear you sing? Don't you want a chance of getting into my play one day?"

"Very much! But what am I to do?"

"Sing to me unaccompanied—it's quite simple. I'll tell you in a minute whether you've a voice or not. . . . Then we can talk things over."

"No." Gail shook her head. "Such a test wouldn't be fair to me, I'm afraid."

"What are you frightened of? Nerves are no good in the profession, you know."

"I'm sorry, Mr Rigglesworth. I can't possibly sing to you without my accompanist."

He glowered at her for a moment, then, "All right," he said sullenly. "I'll come to the theatre one night . . . perhaps."

He turned his back on her, and she went to look for Derek.

"How did you get on?" asked Peter eagerly, as she came into the front room.

"He'll come to Wimbledon to hear me one night . . . perhaps," she answered coldly. "Have you seen Derek?"

"Wait a minute! . . . Athelstan was interested, wasn't he?"

"Oh yes, he was interested all right," replied Gail satirically. Then she smiled. "It was sweet of you, Peter, to bring us together, anyway."

"Did he mention his play?"

"Of course!"

"I believe it's fearful, but for God's sake take it seriously."

"Oh, I will, if I get a chance! . . . What can have become of my husband?" She looked round the crowded room, dominated at the moment by the gruff roar of Halim, the Bulgarian violinist, and the shrill cries of his French wife.

"Were you looking for Mr Vortigern?" asked Pamela Carraway of Gail in a sugary tone. "Because he went away . . . oh! . . . about a quarter of an hour ago, with the dark girl in the red velvet."

"With Beryl?" exclaimed Peter. For a second he and Gail looked at each other in surprise; then she said easily, "They were both going in the same direction; they'll be able to help one another through the fog. I must be off too, Peter. I'm asked to a hen supper at a friend's flat at Hammersmith." She held out her hand. But Peter insisted on going down with her to find her a taxi. They moved towards the door, but just as they reached it the bell rang downstairs.

"Somebody's come very late!" said Peter, and ran on down in front of her. He opened the front door and gave an exclamation. Gail, looking over the banisters, saw Monty Du Parc, taking off his gloves in the little hall, which he seemed to fill with the aura of prosperity. He sparkled as though damp fog must dissolve where'er he walked.

"Hulloa, Gail, m'darling!" he called up the staircase, almost before he could see more than her foot and ankle descending. "Not running away, are you? . . . Peter, order her back!"

"Of course she'll stay now you've come, Monty! Come up and take something to keep the chill out!"

They returned upstairs with Monty, who, as soon as he entered the drawing-room, exchanged a nod and a smile with Mr Harington, still standing almost apologetically near the door. Then, over a Gin and It, he asked Gail, "Did you know, dear, you had two distinguished visitors last Saturday night at Golders Green?"

"No. Who were they?"

"Forshaw and Inman!" replied Monty.

"Oh, and to think I never knew!"

"We didn't mean you should know!" Monty's horn-rim glasses beamed like miniature spots. "I took 'em up in the back of the circle," he explained.

"Three distinguished visitors, then!" murmured Peter.

"Pipe down, old son!" Monty hit his arm affectionately. "We wanted to catch you unawares, Gail."

"You did. And the verdict?"

"Swell! You've gained authority. Everything carried right up to where we were standing. Nobody could have given a better show, in my opinion."

"And in theirs?" enquired Gail.

"Well, Inman was on your side already; we know that, don't we?" He laughed most genially. "Old Bob's a bit harder to win over, but he agreed with Inman on Saturday. Rare to find 'em unanimous about anything these days. Anyhow, I'm to tell you he would like to see you at All-Star House to-morrow at twelve. Of course, you can come?"

"Of course. We've got this week out, as you know."

"What does Forshaw want to see her about?" demanded Peter eagerly.

"How should I know, old lad? Nothing odd, is there, in his wanting a little chat with one of his leading ladies? Maybe, he just wants to tell her how much he liked her on Saturday. . . . No, not another drink, thanks, Peter. By the way, Gail, how far have they given you your dates ahead for *Spotlights*?"

"Oh, up to Christmas or nearly!"

"You sigh! Don't you like the show?"

"Bolton, Blackburn, Wigan . . . and Crewe on Sunday morning with the church bells ringing! . . . It doesn't make me feel pious!"

Monty laughed heartily. "I'm afraid, m'dear, *Spotlights* won't oblige you by stopping before Christmas. You'd never believe, Peter, what a money-spinner that old show is! This is its fourth year in the provinces, and it looks like running for ever."

"With me in it?" screamed Gail.

"That's just what makes it a sure-fire proposition," answered Monty gallantly.

"But if Forshaw and Inman wanted to," suggested the cunning Peter, "they could take her out of it and put her into something better, couldn't they?"

"Any funny thing could happen in this business of ours," agreed Monty. "Well, Peter, if you *will* tempt me. . . ." He accepted a second cocktail. "I've a message for you, too," he went on. "There's a conference about the Blackpool show at All-Star House on Friday at 2.30—producer, authors, composers, everybody who's got anything important to do with it, so *you* mustn't miss. . . . That show's going to be this boy's big chance, Gail!"

"I'm so glad . . . so terribly glad, Peter!" There were tears in Gail's eyes as she squeezed Peter's hand, and why ask if they were all of them tears of quite undiluted joy?

"I wonder what's cooking now?" murmured Jack Kelham to his wife. He had taken up a position by the cocktail table and had a full glass in one hand and a sausage roll in the other.

"D'you mean to say there's more to eat coming?" cried Nita, puffing out her cheeks. "Why, I haven't had such a blow-out for weeks!"

"I mean, what's cooking over there?" Jack indicated Monty Du Parc with his eyebrow.

Nita followed his glance. "Oh, *him!*" she said. "Something tricky, you can bet."

"I must have a word with Monty before he goes," said Jack, putting down his glass with a wistful look at the bottle.

"Then now's your chance!" said Nita. "He's just going!"

Monty was exchanging affectionate hand-shakes with Gail and Peter, and Nita clearly heard him say, "Twelve sharp, to-morrow, at All-Star House, remember! We mustn't keep old Bob waiting!"

It was not in Nita to be bitter, but she sighed. Then as Monty made for the door with his long stride, "Hurry, Jack!" she hissed. "You'll miss him!"

"Yes, I must have just *one* word!" declared Jack, rushing after the new Fizz director. "Monty!" he called, as the tall figure glided down the stairs. Monty looked round with his hand on the street-door handle. "Cheerio!" he shouted back, and the door slammed behind him.

"Well?" enquired Nita, as her husband returned with thoughtful steps.

"I've had it!" replied Jack, and jerking out his cigarette-case, spilt the contents all over the floor.

"I must rush, too," Gail was saying to Peter. "Oh, Peter, when I see Forshaw to-morrow . . . do you think that, in spite of Monty's dreadful hints about my being in *Spotlights* for ever, there might be some good news for me?"

"But, of course!" declared Peter. "I'm absolutely convinced——"

"Oh, heavens! Be careful what you say! . . . Ah! Jack dear, God bless you!" and in passing she patted the top of Jack's egg-shaped skull as he grovelled for the last of his cigarettes.

"*What*——" began Jack, looking up, extremely ruffled.

"No, Jack, say *which*—gin or whisky—and help yourself!" cried Peter, pursuing Gail to see her off.

V

Derek and Beryl, after leaving the party, had been lucky enough to catch sight of a taxi looming slowly along the far side of the Embankment not far from the house. Derek's roars brought it cautiously over, with its lamps on, to where they waited. "I'll do my best," said the man dubiously, when directed to drive to the stage-door of the Duke's Theatre in Lower Regent Street. "But it's got very thick; you'd be wiser to go by the District."

"That doesn't happen to suit us," answered Derek, opening the door for Beryl.

Side by side in the gloom, while the taxi felt its way along the Embankment eastwards, hooting at every turn, they felt cut off from the whole world. Derek remarked this as he offered Beryl a cigarette and lit it for her. "But then," he added, throwing the match away, "I'm used to being solitary, and I should guess that you are, too."

"Haven't known me very long, have you, for generalizations about me?"

"Maybe not. But if there's a thing I pride myself on, it's a certain capacity for observation. And one hasn't to look twice at you to see you don't mix with the mob. You have an aura (whatever that may mean) which tells me so much."

"Really? . . . My aura spill any more beans?"

"Yes, it tells me this." He dropped his voice. "You've been hurt lately, Beryl."

She gave a little start. "Come again!" she invited, turning her face away from him. "What do you imagine I'm grieving over?"

"Not over the man, I think . . . but for having let him get under your guard. . . . You seldom do that, you know."

She turned with a smile that was a little pale. "I don't know if this is a usual line of yours——" she began.

"I don't bother to throw out lines to women. If they don't like me to speak my mind . . . well——"

"I was trying to say that, if it isn't a line . . . you're doing pretty well, Mr Vortigern . . . and there's more in you than I thought at first."

"Sorry to gather I made such a poor entrance! But no doubt I'd had a pretty bad build-up from your brother beforehand?"

"Expect me to say?"

"Thanks! You confirm me. But I don't complain. A wife's friends are so seldom her husband's—are they?"

"I wouldn't know. What about a husband's woman friends? Do wives love them?"

"I wouldn't care. Life's too short!" He edged closer to her, but she remained still and irresponsible as steel. "When," he continued, "one finds in this damned prison of life, where, as a rule, the walls

simply laugh back your curses, a voice that answers and, my God! actually *understands* . . . well, one doesn't waste time over the things that don't matter! . . . I'm reading your thoughts, too . . . or am I?"

"This taxi seems to have stopped for good and all," replied Beryl, rubbing the black window-pane with her finger.

"Why don't you answer my question?" insisted Derek. "Are you afraid to?"

"I haven't yet made up my mind if I will . . . yet," she answered coolly.

"Well, we've a grand chance for reflection now, both of us, haven't we?" he said, listening to the faint hoots and shouts round the stationary cab. "We might be marooned on a desert island, just we two!"

"Shuddersome idea!" retorted Beryl.

"You'd find it so very boring?" he asked as the taxi moved slowly on again.

"If you couldn't think up something new . . . yes. There's one thing about you I greatly dislike."

"Only one?" His attempt at indifference quavered.

"It's enough for now! I simply loathe self-pity."

"So do I! Nothing I hate worse! But I really don't think you can fairly charge me . . . all things considered——"

"But that's just it. You keep on considering them . . . and moaning about them. If you were a phony, I'd understand. But, being what I believe you to be, can't you fight?"

"Give me something to fight for, Beryl!"

"Yourself! Isn't that good enough?"

"I'm not such a happy egoist . . . unfortunately!"

"Well, then, shall I say Gail?"

"Sorry, lady! That line isn't working. Hasn't been for a long time."

"How long have you been married, then?"

"Eternities! . . . Actually four years."

"But she's still in love with you . . . I could see that."

"An act! I thought you'd have been sharper! Believe me, if Gail's troubling you——"

"She isn't. After all, four years—she's had her chance!"

"Well, then, what are you stalling for? If you don't know the first time you meet a man, you won't know any better the hundredth. I didn't dream any more than you did when I went to that dreary party this afternoon that the big thing was waiting for me there! But now I know, Beryl, you could be the making of me!"

"Are you worth it? That's what I've been asking myself since the moment I saw you."

"Aha! Then it wasn't such a bad entrance as you pretended!"

"I was interested before you came. I knew Peter must be prejudiced against you."

"I should worry what he thinks of me! He has a motive, and it's not a pretty one! . . . It's what *you* think that I care about!"

"I'm not a husband-stealer as a rule. But you'll get nowhere with Gail—that's a sure thing, Derek!"

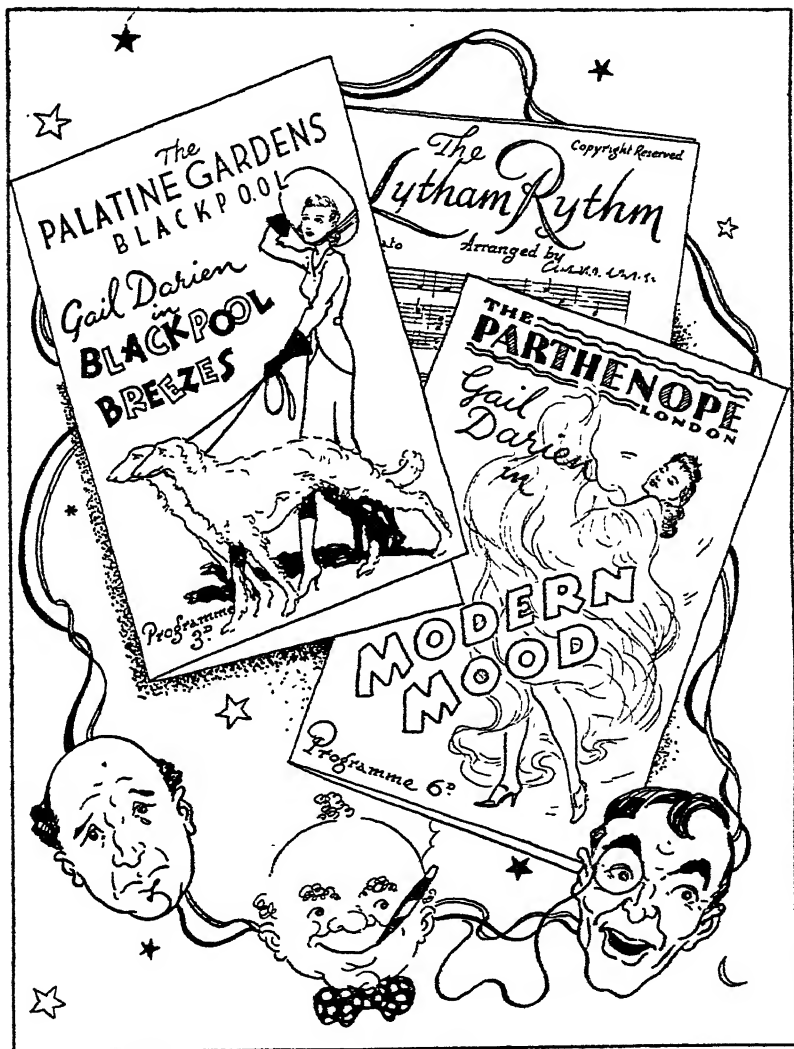
"Do you imagine"—he had got his arm round her waist by now—"I'd let Gail stand between us? You don't know me!"

"Ah, well!" she murmured, closing her eyes. "Gail can't win every time, can she?"

Her lips met his and rested there. His way of kissing took her breath away. Outside, the motor-horns blended with a warning from a river tug. Their mouths remained together. . . .

"It's risky to go any farther!" said a voice suddenly, and they tore themselves apart to see the taxi-man's head peering in at the door. "I think we must be near Lambeth Bridge," he said. "You'd better get out and walk to Westminster Station."

THE END OF PART ONE



PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE uncertain sunshine of a grey day in early June glimmered through the overhanging clouds as the car rushed along the leafy roads from Whitchurch, past the delicate Georgian brick of Tarporley, towards Warrington. It was a large saloon, barely second-hand, pale-blue, and chromium-fitted, and Gail Darien was in the driver's seat with Peter Warner beside her. In the back seats, behind the glass screen, were Jack Kelham and Nita, with a frying-pan-shaped case of shiny leather on the grey carpet at their feet.

"This is the way to travel," declared Nita luxuriously. "Sweet of Gail to bring us up with her!"

"I'd rather have my own car, all the same," answered Jack.

"Just as lucky!" remarked Nita.

"Mind, I don't say this isn't a top-liner! It can tackle speeds with ease that I should only attempt . . . well, with a certain amount of caution. But the reason why I won't have a big car is that they're so damned inconvenient."

"Think so?" Nita stretched out her pretty legs and crossed her ankles comfortably; then she leaned back with her hand in the padded loop by the window.

"Oh! I don't mean in that way." Jack took a match from the enamelled chromium holder on his side and lit a cigarette. "I mean this sort of car drinks up petrol like a pro in the bar on Friday night; and it's a nuisance to turn in heavy traffic, and——"

"Gail's damned lucky to have it!" Nita cut him short with only the briefest of sighs. "Deserves it too, bless her!"

"I'll say she does," assented Jack. "She only needed her chance, and now it's come she won't let it slip, you'll see."

"It's old Peter's chance too," added Nita. "It's nice when all one's friends get a break together and jump into the big money—isn't it?" she asked plaintively.

Silence fell, broken only by desultory remarks as they by-passed Warrington and approached the dusky flush of Wigan's environment, with its ridges of slag and skeleton winding-wheels. In the streets Gail coughed slightly at the coal-dust and wrinkled her nostrils. Jack and Nita disputed violently over the precise location of the various theatres and cinemas, and as the car slowed down at the central traffic lights, Jack leaned out of the window and enquired of a patrolling police-sergeant in what he held to be authentic Lancs, "Canst tell me road to Empire, officer?"

The policeman pushed back his helmet and looked at him thought-

fully. "Actually," he replied, "that depends very much, old man, upon the sense in which you are using the word 'Empire,' doesn't it?"

"My God!" gasped Jack, falling back upon the cushions. "Police College! . . . Home, Gail, and don't spare the horses!"

They shot forward on the amber and cleared the big, main crossing of the town.

"Gail's a better driver than Derek," opined Jack, as she went weaving through the heavy traffic towards the northern outlet. "He's really careless, you know. He smashed two gramophone records I'd just bought while he was driving me in London last week."

"How?"

"Swerved to avoid a lorry, and my elbow went right through them."

"Why had you got them under your elbow in a car?"

"Because I was bringing them home for a birthday present for you, if you want to know."

"Thanks so many millions! . . . Why didn't Derek travel up with us, by the way?"

"He went on by train with their heavy stuff last week, I believe, to see things were all straight in their flat in Lowther Avenue."

"They take a whole flat now, do they?"

"Derek would have taken the whole Imperial Hotel, I fancy, if he'd had his way. He says if he's to be stuck down in a dump like Blackpool for the entire summer he must have room to work."

"Throwing his weight about, eh? I suppose it is a bit humiliating for him to be out of a job with his wife the star of the season at Blackpool."

"He'll bear it," declared Jack. "A flat on North Shore, where he can lie on a sofa all day, smoking cigars, and pretending he's working at his plays, isn't exactly love on the dole, is it?"

Nita frowned. "You know, Jack, if they're both chucking it about with both hands, like this . . . the car . . . and their own flat in Blackpool . . . and all the rest. Her salary is a good one, I suppose . . . but it won't run to everything!"

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Let 'em go it while they're young! They'll learn sense in time . . . as we have!"

Nita bridled. "Really, Jack, I'm not all that older than Gail! And if she'd had to go through all I've had to——"

"She couldn't have taken it, darling! She's a dear, but she's never been up against it properly."

A little way from Preston, in an almost pastoral quiet, a large white sign with an arrow pointing left proclaimed:

BLACKPOOL.

Gail swung the car smoothly into the by-pass, while Peter looked round, tapping on the glass and grinning at his friends in the rear.

"Where," continued Nita, pursuing a gloomy train of thought, "are *our* dreadful digs exactly?"

"Close to Central Beach, very handy."

"Why did we have to go there? Deafened all day by barkers and ice-cream merchants and kids howling."

"I'd far rather be there than miles away on North Shore like Gail and Derek. We're close to everything, and it's only a few minutes by tram to our pier."

"I never saw," grumbled Nita, who seemed in the mood to quarrel with everything, "why we had to go into the show on *that* pier. Either of the others stands far higher."

They discussed the relative prestige of the shows on Blackpool's three piers with intermittent acrimony; and, since everybody has a right to their own opinion on this point, it is needless to enter the debate, even to the extent of disclosing upon which pier it was that the "Ace of Anecdote" was engaged (and, he hoped, billed) to appear. Meanwhile, the car swept round the outskirts of Preston, which lay, a sombre stain on their right, with a single immense block of red building rising from its centre, and its black spires and chimneys needling against the silver-grey sky.

"And I did hope," concluded Nita in the deepest despondency, glancing at the odd-shaped leather case at her feet, "that we should never have to go back to the old uke again!"

"We were a bit unlucky," admitted Jack. "I'd practically fixed, as you know, to go shares in that concert party at Douglas; but on the terms they asked, I couldn't afford to risk our capital."

"Our *what*?"

"Our savings-book. . . . Give me the uke!"

"No," declared Nita firmly. "You're not going to sing just at this moment. You'd make me cry, and Gail might swerve off the road."

"Not *this* road!" answered Jack, peering out of the window with a cheerful grin.

They were launched now upon the wide motor-road that runs arrow-like from Preston to the sea, and in a flash the whole atmosphere of the journey seemed to have changed. Gail had whipped up the speed of the powerful car, and they were rushing forward in a gathering stream of traffic all bound for Blackpool. Giant char-à-bancs, pink and crimson and blue, lumbered along in their rear; buses appeared before them for a moment, going at their stately pace, were overtaken and disappeared; two-seaters tooted impudently and raced by them; gleaming cars of expensive make, enshrining heavy faces and long cigars, competed with them for the middle of the road. Gail allowed them to pass and dwindle into the distance over the rises. "We're not speed-racing, after all," she observed to Peter, "and Derek doesn't expect me much before tea-time."

"I can see Miss Bingley, that's my landlady, setting the dogs on me," laughed Peter, "if I arrived looking as though I needed lunch!"

"She keeps dogs?"

"Hundreds of them!"

"Peter!"

"It's true! . . . Dogs of all sorts and materials! . . . Dogs in china, in wood, in bronze, in elongated glass, in embroidered wool, in felt with red cotton tongues . . . unforgetting the stuffed remains of her two favourite spaniels, who sit on chairs in your room and watch you eat . . . greedily!"

"Peter, you're crazy to-day!" laughed Gail.

"It's Blackpool! . . . My God, what a projectile!"

Hooting indignantly, a small sports-car had shot across their path, and was to all appearances about to cleave an orange coach some fifty yards ahead in twain. Peter chuckled. "That's Blackpool, too! It gets into the blood! Don't you feel it? . . . All the world on wheels and hurtling towards one mad goal of pleasure!"

"I can't ever understand why you get so excited over the wretched place!"

"Can't you? . . . Oh, but you should, Gail Darien! Blackpool . . . happy, glorious Blackpool's going to give you an ovation! Can't you hear them roaring already?"

"No. And I don't expect them to! If tha' canst play Blackpool, lass, tha' canst play any place!"

"Pessimist!" shouted Peter. "A-a-a-ah!"

II

Over the lift of the low ridge in front, with its coronal of trees and white farm buildings peeping among them, there had leapt into the air like a fountain—the Tower! Svelte and ethereal it rose, its traceries silver against a pale-blue patch of sky where the Atlantic radiance was dissolving the lead of the clouds. Peter chuckled, and jerked back the glass that separated them from Jack and Nita.

"Here we are, boys and girls!" he shouted, while his curly hair blew over his forehead almost on to his golden-spectacles in the draught from the half-opened windscreen. "'God bless us all! said Tiny Tim!'" His brown eyes shone with almost as rich a colouring as his sister's.

"Whoopee!" echoed Jack wildly. "Here's luck to all and five calls at every show!" His egg-face was fractured in a wide grin, and he dipped his hand in his hip-pocket. "I've saved it for this moment!" he cried, drawing out a battered spirit-flask. "Here's to the triumph of *Blackpool Breezes*! . . . Gail first!" He passed the flask through to her.

She smilingly shook her head. Her eyes seemed fixed on the whizzing ribbon of white road in front of her.

"Then you, Peter!" cried Jack. "Here's to your songs!"

"And here's to the old uke!" Peter returned the toast.

"I told you, Jack," said Nita severely, "to leave that flask behind you! Spirits are no good to you! Remember what the doctor said. . . . Here's luck to all!" She set the flask to her lips and tilted it briskly; afterwards, in spite of her husband's murmurs, returning it to her handbag, not to his pocket.

"Why wouldn't you drink to our success together?" asked Peter reproachfully of Gail.

She shrugged her shoulders, with one hand resting lightly on the steering-wheel. "Better drink to success when it's in the bag!" she replied, as she passed a family car laden with baggage, including a pram and several wicker baskets.

In another moment the tall windmill on the outskirts of Blackpool lifted its arms, and the pinkish fringe of the suburbs spread behind it. The Tower was clearer now, and less magical, its crude red paint apparent.

"Well, I'm confident!" said Peter obstinately. "My songs and your singing—we're going to be a team!"

"I hope so, Peter!" She gave him one of her warm, affectionate smiles. "As for me—if I don't spoil your music, I'm content."

"Don't fish, Gail! . . . You know you're going to be tremendous! Why be always looking for bad luck round the corner?"

"I don't know. . . . Bitter experience, perhaps! . . . And I'm sore still at the way they treated me over my salary."

"Telling you to take what they offered or they'd force you to complete your contract for *Spotlights*?"

"Well, it was mean, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Somebody's bit of silly cleverness! I feel so guilty, Gail, for having advised you to go into *Spotlights*!"

"Oh! it wasn't you made me. . . . But in any case, I believe I could have raised their figure for this show if Mr Stulitzer, who calls himself my agent, hadn't joined them in brow-beating me. . . . Forget it!" She jerked back the sliding screen to the rear apartment and called, "Where do I drop you off, Jack?"

"About half-way down Lytham Road, if it's not too much out of your way."

"Of course not. Tell me when we get to the turning!"

She drove down Waterloo Road, slowed by the trams.

"Drop me somewhere near Central Station," suggested Peter. "I'll find a taxi there to take me on to Miss Bingley's."

"You won't. You'll come out to tea first at our place. I told Derek to have it ready there; we don't want to start café-queueing our first afternoon."

"Sure I won't be in the way?"

"Don't be silly! . . . I invite you. . . . What a wind! It would blow a smaller car across the road!"

They disembarked Jack and Nita, with their cases and the ukelele and the back-breaking "portable," in a by-street off the Lytham Road, and Peter had to clutch his hat to his head as he stood on the pavement taking leave. Then he jumped in again, and the car bore forward in the teeth of a whistling gale on to Central Beach.

In the joyous roar of the wind the whole front seemed awlirl. Within the unbroken arch of sky, which must have been one of Blackpool's earliest lures and is still its chief glory, the white clouds curled their edges as they sailed through intermittent blue over the dancing sea. Flashes of foam burst far-off against the black pier-heads. Upon the endless line of low houses, each brighter streak, whether of green window-frame or purple slate or red-tipped roof-ridge, shone jewel-like in the bursts of soft sunshine. Below, the promenading throngs undulated with tossing skirts, fluttering scarves, and flapping trousers. They were like long, speckled serpents, in which the darker clothes of old age alternated with the gay prints, the white flannels, the exotic beach pyjamas and mandarin straw hats of unself-conscious youth. Here and there hardy maids defied the blasts barelegged in bright swim-suits and sandals, and an occasional lost hat bowled mockingly along the roadway between the motor-wheels and the hoofs of the venerable Victorian barouches.

The car ran easily past Central Pier amid the clamour of the barkers ranged before the side-shows which nestled, like flaunting cuckoos, in once prim villas of the 1860's, their façades now disfigured with gesticulating posters. Jostling their mid-Victorian demureness, intruded in scarlet convolutions the tasteless rococo of the 1890's and the dead-white cubical and tubular structures of the present day. And now, beyond the gleaming Woolworth Building, the Tower soared before the travellers in all the detail of its ascending lift and its spidery crown of galleries and pavilions. It seemed to crush the buildings huddled at its foot—Circus and Palace Theatre, their harsh red frontages capped with green pepper-pots and cones. Beyond these again the mustard-coloured kiosks of the North Pier made one more violent daub upon the picture.

At this focal point the crowd of holiday-makers was densest of all, swarming recklessly across the roadway and ignoring alike the clang of the tram bells and the traffic crossings. Young girls, beautified by tinfoil hats and paper caps in the shape of American sailors' head-gear, darted among the cars, and mothers warily shepherded flocks of children clinking with spades and buckets, their underclothes tucked high upon their slim, pink thighs.

"May I pass—*please*?" groaned Gail, exasperatedly pressing the button of her horn; but this only produced a look of affront upon the redoubtable Lancashire faces turned towards her—particularly on that of one matron who judged the middle of the roadway as good a place as any for her child to seek relief from a surfeit of Blackpool rock.

There was nothing for it but to acknowledge that Blackpool belongs to the pedestrians, and drop resignedly to a crawl.

Suddenly Peter gave an exclamation. "Look!" he cried, "there's Derek . . . and Beryl, too! What on earth is *she* doing here?"

The two were waiting to cross the pedestrian strip opposite the Clifton, and Gail drove over it and drew up, waiting for her husband to come to her. As she looked back through the rear window of the car, Peter watched her face. It was hard but inscrutable.

The next moment the driving-side window darkened as Derek stooped to look in. There was a gay, almost defiant look on his ruddy, round face. "Well, well!" he said. "Who'd have thought of running across you in Blackpool? . . . We expected you about five . . . not earlier!"

Peter stared out of the window on his side at Beryl. She stood on the kerb in a dark-blue, belted mac, with a red-spotted blue scarf tied turban-wise round her head, defining her admirable profile. In her eyes, too, Peter fancied he saw a look of defiance, more assured than Derek's.

"I certainly never expected to see you in Blackpool," he said.

"Treat for you, isn't it? I only made up my mind the day before yesterday. I'm staying with Marie Violette, the banjo-duettist, and her aunt. The house is crammed; and Marie and I have to share a bed; she's too fat for that to be a picnic!"

"Did you get our tea ready?" Gail asked Derek. "Peter's coming along for a cup."

"We'll have it at the Savoy," replied Derek. "It was too much of a business arranging a meal in the flat at this hour—the 'service,' you know, includes breakfast and supper only. Park the bus up in Market Square, and come for a stroll with us before tea!"

"No," said Gail shortly. "I'll run along to the flat and leave my things; then I'll join you. Give me the latch-key!"

Derek fumbled in his pocket. "Must you go out there at once?" he grumbled. "I should have thought you wanted a rest. Leave the cases in the car and lock it!"

"Give me the key of the flat!" snapped Gail. "I want to change after this journey. . . . What's the matter with you? You haven't lost the key already, have you?"

Derek reluctantly produced it; then looked at his wrist-watch. "It's nearly three now," he said. "Meet us at the Savoy not later than four . . . it gets so crowded."

III

After Gail had driven off, the other three stood together for a moment rather awkwardly on the corner; then they turned and began to stroll towards the flat outline of Central Pier. Over the top of it, softened by the magic of distance, the Moorish cupolas of South Pier

could be seen, clustered in the glancing breaks of sunshine; and outlined upon a pale-blue sky with rolls of umber cloud at its base, the snowy buildings of Pleasure Beach, the giant sugar-cone of the Big Dipper, the slim black-and-white minaret of the still unfinished Casino, give the illusion of an Oriental city.

Suddenly the devil entered into Peter, for he was thoroughly angry with his sister.

"I believe Zharkov's coming up to Blackpool for our rehearsals, Beryl," he remarked.

"Am I supposed to be interested?" drawled Beryl, with a faint red spot on her cheek-bones.

"Surely," put in Derek, "there can be no need of a Zharkov when we have a Peter Warner . . . Has he 'collaborated' with you?"

"Certainly not!" answered Peter tartly. "He has arranged a good deal of the music for the show, but my numbers are all my own, thank you."

"Come off it, Peter!" jeered Beryl, her eyes glinting dangerously. "You know Les Linacre orchestrated your numbers . . . all three of them . . . and for a very necessary reason!"

"Dear me!" Derek grinned. "This is sisterly, isn't it, Warner?"

Peter had the sense to recover his temper. "Beryl keeps me in the same size of hats. That's her job. Yes, Linacre orchestrated my *five* numbers, if you don't mind, Beryl! But I thought you were asking me, Vortigern, whether Zharkov had helped in the composition. And I repeat he had nothing to do with my work . . . and never will while I live!"

"Who was it said, 'You should never say "never" '?" murmured Derek. "... Damn!"

A clamour of dogs had interrupted him, and the promenade seemed suddenly full of yapping and leaping forms in silky white and brown, while a scarlet leash wrapped itself round Derek's legs, and his hat, as he jerked to free himself, flew off and whirled along the pavement.

"Och! I am sorry!" cried a clear, Glaswegian voice, and a tiny figure with slanting brows, violet eyes, and coppery hair curling out from under a tight turban, darted forward. "Will you be coming away, now, Dinky?" she commanded. "Just let me unwind you, sir! It won't take me an hour! . . . Why, Peter, darling, is that you? Tell your friend there it's only me, will you? . . . Och! and your hat, too! . . . Musso will retrieve that for you, don't worry!"

"No, please! I beg you won't let the dog touch it!" spluttered Derek, crimson with annoyance, as he tried to lift his feet out of the yapping little Pom's lead.

"You can trust Musso . . . honestly . . . he's a golden retriever of the first breeding; he could pull down a silk stocking without a ladder! . . . Peter, my beloved, introduce me, and I'll begin to apologize in airnest!"

"This," explained Peter, trying to master his merriment, "is Zoe . . . that is to say, Zorilda . . . the famous singer, dancer, and mistress of—"

"I forbid you to mention the Duke's name——" screamed Zoe.

"Mistress of Illusion!" explained Peter. "Did you think I'd give you away, darling? Meet Zorilda, the Great White Witch, the Wizard of Oz. . . ."

"Oswaldtwistle!" corrected Zoe.

"Ace of Thought-readers, Queen of Egyptian Mystery!" concluded Peter. "In short, everything about her's a fake . . . except her loveliness, isn't it, dearest?"

Peter's account of Zorilda's famous act, "The Temple of Isis," was surely inadequate. For in that act there was something of everything. Zorilda sang a bit of *Aida*, danced a contortionist dance in which live doves fluttered to perch upon her wrists and forehead, mimed the suicide of Cleopatra with a pathos that drew tears from her audience, none of whom suspected that the snakes were gutta-percha, gave a display of thought-reading blindfolded, and finally allowed herself to be locked by members of the audience into a golden mummy case, from which she duly escaped to hail the house from the circle. . . . Some act! No wonder that Mr Forshaw (as "Bob Forshaw, Ltd.") had booked it for one of the lesser summer shows of Blackpool, which had opened under his management the week before.

Zorilda did not, however, take offence at Peter's summary description, but merely answered, "Thank you, Peter darling! The most understanding husband I ever had, believe you me, Mr—er?"

"Vortigern's the name," said Derek, realizing the folly of making a fuss, now that Musso had brought back his hat unblemished save for specks of agglutinative Blackpool sand.

"And do you know who *he* is?" Peter asked Zoe.

"Now, wait! Don't tell me!" pleaded Zoe. With her muscular little legs taut, she stood on tiptoe in shoes that Cinderella could not have got her foot into, while the dogs snuffled and squeaked around her, and studied Derek's embarrassed features. "No!" she sighed at last. "I've not seen his face before . . . except in dreams!"

"Derek Vortigern's Gail Darien's husband," Peter told her.

"Och, I *knew*! . . . It will have been in Gail's dressing-room I saw your photo all over the place, Derek!"

"That must have been some of your second sight!" growled Derek.

"I'm not photogenic enough for a star's room."

"That's what *you* think!" Zoe now had her arm through his, and the whole party had turned with her and were moving back towards the North Pier, with its shimmering white theatre, the dogs racing ahead with joyous barks. "I'd beg for your portrait for my own room," she told Derek, "but the Duke, you know——!"

"Zoe, this is my sister Beryl!" interposed Peter, trying to call her off the frozenly smiling Derek.

Zoe shook hands. "So you're here, too, for the Big Top, are you?" she asked. "Come to hear your brother's music at the Palatine Gardens? How do you manage it, Peter love? What have you got that I haven't? . . . No, don't tell me! . . . I feel Derek has even more! I'm sorry, Peter, my spouse! I just can't notice you when this wonderful boy's around! It's strange how you've come in the nick of time, Derek! I've nowhere to sleep to-night. . . . You needn't look so d—d unsympathetic, Peter! She put me out this morning, and Dinky . . . and Musso . . . and Jean. . . . Come, here, Jean! Don't sniff at that clairgymn!"

A blameless bank-clerk blushed violently, and Zoe went on, "Yes, she put us all out . . . and Martha the monk . . . and Mamma, too, just because Musso had the misfortune to upset some eau-de-Cologne on her carpet last night. 'If you can't tell the difference,' I told her, 'between eau-de-Cologne and—and—*vol de nuit*, you should have your sinus examined. I've often thought,' I told her, 'that you couldn't smell what was right under your nose,' and at that she began to throw my things through the window! She used to be so nice, but she's gone queer this season. The Duke'll be hopping mad when he hears of it! But now I've had to put the baskets and Mamma, with Martha the monk, in the theatre and go out and look for rooms. That was what I was doing when you trampled on poor Dinky, Derek! You should realize your strength, you gorgeous beast!"

"You should train your dogs better," Peter admonished her. "I've a mind to give them to Miss Bingley to stuff!"

"I would haunt you to your grave, Alexander Korda . . . William Corder, I mean! Och! I'd give something for even the Red Barn to sleep in to-night. I've looked everywhere—everywhere, I assure you." She cast a despairing glance round at the sand, the sea, the gulls, the seats on the esplanade, the wooden Windmill, and finally at one of the Victorian barouches standing by the kerb, which she appeared to be measuring with her eye.

"You see," she ruminated, "there's Mamma and Cousin Julie, who keeps an eye on her; and there's me and Adrienne . . . that's my little sister, you know, Miss Warner, training as a dancer . . . and Caldwell, my maid, and Martha the monk, and the wee doggies . . . and I like to have a spare bed—"

"For the Duke?" enquired Peter mischievously.

"Let that bee as it buzzes, husband of mine!" Zoe rebuked him. "No, it's no use waiting for my blushes, Derek darling! They're a slow-motion affair, ye ken!" She stopped abruptly. "I must turn back. Mamma will be wishing for news of her tea! Come, Jean! . . . Come, Musso! . . . God be wi' us till we meet again!"

Like a feather she seemed to tremble in the swirl of the crowd and

be borne away, but the cries of her dogs were carried back upon the breeze!"

"Ouf!" said Derek with profound relief. "Now let's have our tea!"

IV

They were only just in time to secure a table upstairs at the Savoy, which was already crowded. A waitress, sweet-tempered in spite of the crush, came smiling to greet them, advising them what to eat with a family solicitude.

"When's your first rehearsal, Peter?" enquired Beryl, taking a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of her mac.

"To-morrow at eleven at the Paragon Ball-room," he answered.

"By the way, Warner," said Derek. "My wife has been grousing like hell over that 'Castles in the Sand' song you've given her."

"She never told me she didn't like it!" said Peter quickly.

"My dear boy, you evidently don't know it's a husband's privilege to get all the grumbles. No doubt, she'll explain to you what's wrong. . . . Ah! Here she is!"

"What's wrong with what?" asked Gail, slipping into an empty seat. She had put on a light summery frock, and her head was bare, except for a net to keep her hair in place. Many glances had followed the sheen of it as she passed through the restaurant. Peter thought she looked pale and repressed.

"He tells me you don't care for 'Castles in the Sand,'" said Peter.

"Nonsense!" replied Gail. "It's lovely! What do you want to talk such blah for, Derek?"

"You must admit, my dear, you said the words were impossible to sing!"

"Only in one place. Peter'll understand when I explain."

"I'll put it right," promised Peter. "Just tell me where I've slipped up, Gail!"

"Well, not now, for God's sake!" pleaded Derek. "Sorry to come the heavy husband, Peter; but this little girl wants her tea."

"I'm not starving!" retorted Gail. She opened her hand-bag. "Quite an impressive mail at the flat," she said, taking out a handful of letters. "A nice little note from Bob Forshaw, quite encouraging! That old rat-bag can be almost human sometimes. And a devastatingly cordial welcome from the Chairman of the Palatine Gardens Entertainment Company. . . . It's too much happiness! I'm not used to it!"

"Feeling starry?" demanded Peter affectionately.

"Dizzy . . . more like a shooting star!" she replied.

Peter was puzzled at her paleness and bitterness.

"Will you have some of our tea?" asked Beryl. "There's a clean cup."

"Thanks, no. They're bringing me some fresh. I dislike leavings," said Gail, feeling at the bottom of her hand-bag. "Also a letter from Bobo," she announced. "Spluttering with gratitude!"

"Why?" Peter wanted to know.

"They've given her a little bit in the show, as I asked them to. Only three minutes or so, but you can do a lot in three minutes, if you know how."

"Why on earth do you want to bother about Bobo?" asked Derek. "As an artist she stinks . . . and she'd cut your throat for fourpence!"

"Poor Bobo!" sighed Gail. "She won't have much chance. . . . She's been out of a job, you know, since she had to go into hospital in March. . . . Might have been any of us, after all!"

"You're too good, Gail!" Peter told her. "I think we could have done without Miss Bobo Baggaley in our show!"

"Oh, let the kid alone!" said Gail in a spurt of bad temper. "She's mean . . . but no meaner than many! Got an aspirin, Derek?" He shook his head.

"Have a Veganin?" offered Beryl politely.

"No, thanks. It doesn't act with me. . . . Oh! Here's my tea at last; it will do quite as well!"

She began to pour out for herself; then suddenly paused. "I forgot!" she said, smiling up at Peter. "A super-r-r-rb bouquet of flowers at the flat!"

"Flowers?" snapped Derek. "Who the devil sends you flowers here?" He shot a sour look at Peter.

"Monty Du Parc, if you want to know," said Gail with a wicked smile. "Oh! I'm on the up and up to-day . . . *but* definitely!"

CHAPTER TWO

I

THE Paragon Ball-room (which you will not find in Blackpool to-day) was neither the largest nor yet the most splendid of the city's dance halls, though it had its quota of pillars, coloured marbles, and gilding. Here, on the morning after Gail and Peter's arrival, Arthur Inman was taking a rehearsal of *Blackpool Breezes*; and here Peter, as he listened from a bench under the gallery to Gail singing "Castles in the Sand," accompanied by Doherty at the piano, with the Tizano Girls weaving figures behind her, felt somebody tugging at his sleeve.

He turned impatiently, and saw Derek lurking in the shadow of one of the pillars. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I want to watch this number!"

"I'll wait," said Derek with a propitiatory smile, and not until a few minutes later, when there was a break, while Inman spoke to Gail and the dancers stood adjusting the waists of their practice skirts and pulling up the heels of their sandals, did he speak again. Then, "I want you, old man," he said, "to do us . . . Beryl and me, that is . . . a good turn, if you will."

Peter frowned. "What's all this about you and Beryl?"

"Just a silly misunderstanding. I'm afraid Gail's been barking up the wrong tree. She's nervy over this big show, and I quite understand it, don't you?"

"Possibly. But what's that got to do with——"

"I'm telling you. When she drove along to our flat yesterday afternoon before tea, she found things belonging to your sister there."

"Really?"

"Yes. Of course, it was very simple. Before I took Beryl out to lunch I'd shown her into the bedroom to powder her nose. I had to find her some place for that sacred purpose, hadn't I? . . . Well, you know how careless she is; she must have turned a lot of stuff out of her bag to get at something; and she left behind on the dressing-table a hair-net, and, what was more awkward, a—a—telegram I'd sent her a few days before. . . . I can't think why she wanted to go on carrying it about!"

"What had you to wire to Beryl for?" asked Peter coldly.

"Just to invite her up here for the week-end. I said I'd fix her in lodgings somewhere if she could come. There was no harm in that, was there? She and I have been pals lately . . . same as you and Gail are . . . no harm in *that*, is there?"

Peter was silent. Indeed, what answer was there?

"I was faced with a week-end all alone in this dump, you know.

... But Gail seems to think all kinds of sinister things. She's on edge with the show——"

"Yes, you said that before. But I don't quite see where I come in. ... I'll speak to Beryl, and tell her she's being a little fool."

"Oh, all girls drop things about!" grinned Derek. "That's why I wasn't anxious yesterday for Gail to drive up to the flat before I'd been in to have a look-round. No, what I want you to do ... just to save Gail unnecessary worry at this critical time ... is to say *you* sent the wire. You see, it's only got a London post-mark; I sent it on my way to Euston last Friday. And luckily I only signed it 'Slim'—that's a sort of nickname she has for me, because—well—I'm *not* slim. But it might quite as well be a nursery name she had for her little brother, don't you see?"

"This is idiotic! Gail must have noticed how surprised I was to find Beryl here."

"I don't think so. She was glowering too hard at me. And if she did, well, the answer is, Beryl had refused to come when you wired, and then changed her mind afterwards without telling you."

"In short, tell Gail a lot of lies to save you——"

"No, Warner, to save her! Surely you don't want, any more than I do, to have her put off her stroke at this crucial moment of her career by an emotional storm?"

"You swear, Vortigern, there's nothing between you and Beryl?"

"Definitely! Beryl and I get on together ... we have the same sense of humour for one thing. But as for anything beyond that ... well, your sister would be dreadfully wounded at the suggestion! *She* might go up in smoke, too! Rows and storms are exactly what we don't want between now and Gail's opening. ... Come, Warner, it's only a little thing I'm asking you to do, for Gail's sake!"

Peter hesitated. Then, "If I take that telegram on myself," he said, "it's on one condition only, that Beryl leaves Blackpool to-night."

"That's as good as saying I'm a liar! I call it pretty damned insulting, Warner!"

"Those are my terms."

"Well, I wouldn't like to be the one to tell Beryl!"

"I will. Leave that to me!"

"All right. I'll simply tell her you'll bear her out if she says to Gail that you sent the wire."

"Yes. I'll agree to that. This business must be put a stop to before Gail gets upset."

As Derek slipped away Peter's attention was recalled to the floor by an explosive noise from Inman.

Bobo Baggaley had come bouncing in to begin her one song, and Mr Inman, it appeared, disliked her manner of entering exceedingly. He sent her back three times before he would allow her to start the

song, and then, as soon as she had finished the first verse, called out sharply, "That'll do!"

"Oh, but, Mr Inman," wailed Bobo, "there's another verse and the dance!"

"Quite impossible!" snapped Inman. "We have to keep to a very strict running time. . . . Please, get off, Miss—Miss—"

"Arthur!" said a voice from overhead, and peering up into the dimness of the empty gallery, Inman was aware of an enormous check cap hovering over the ledge.

"Who the hell's that?" he called.

"Me!" said the voice of Bob Forshaw, and the scarlet curve of his lobster-claw nose appeared beneath the cap.

"Sorry," growled Inman. "I didn't recognize you in that gorbliney!"

"Arthur!" continued Forshaw, "where are you putting that song?"

"To open after the interval," replied Inman.

"Nay, but people won't be back from t'bars!" objected Forshaw. "You know how 'tis, Arthur! Give this little girl a better break than that!"

Inman flourished the loosely pinned pages of the script at him. "Are you asking me to change the whole running order?" he demanded.

"Wait a moment!" replied Forshaw. "I'm comin' down."

In a minute he appeared upon the floor. "Arthur," he said, "that's a reet good number. What about beginnin' the Circus scene with it. . . . How *are* you beginnin' that scene?"

"I haven't decided yet, and if every Tom, Dick, and Harry butts into my rehearsals, I never shall!"

"Nay, but try this idea of mine, Arthur! Put this song there! Ay, and have Tizano Girls to dance it wi' her! 'Twill make more of a show that road!"

Bobo positively glowed. This was practically making a production number of her little song, "Crazy Katie." "Oh, thank yew, Mr Forshaw!" she murmured with a smile that threatened to swallow him up—at any rate he stepped back quickly.

Inman regarded the two of them cynically for a moment. Then, "Just a minute, Bob!" he said, and drew Forshaw aside under the gallery. Their conference lasted some ten minutes, at the end of which Forshaw emerged looking as if he had had a large tooth extracted without anæsthetic. "Ay," he groaned, "if I can get them made in time I'll do it. But it's my belief it's a hoondred pounds thrown clean away. Not one person in front will notice *what* stooff those dresses are made of! But if you hold by it, Arthur . . . well, I suppose, it will get my income-tax down."

"Then it'll be all right about that song, Bob," answered Inman.

Forshaw, his silvery hair, even, looking dank, departed with the

gait of an old and broken man, watched by Bobo with swimming eyes.

"Now, Miss—er—" Inman called sharply to her.

"Baggaley!" interposed Doherty from the piano.

"*What* did you say?" demanded Inman.

"Baggaley! 'Tis the name!" Doherty grinned.

"Oh yes! Well, Miss Baggaley, as we're moving your song to a more important place later in the show," Inman's sardonic mask was appalling, "I shan't require you any more to-day. You may go."

"I hope," said Bobo loftily, covering her stocky little frame with an overcoat, "you'll take these girls through my number before I come to-morrow. It'll save wastin' a lot o' my time, won't it?"

"Everything you desire shall be done, Miss Baggaley. We are here only to carry out your wishes."

Bobo glanced at him with a faint suspicion. "Well, I mean ter say," she murmured, and walked off the floor with a sullen backward glance through her heavily blackened lashes.

"Now," said Inman with relief as the door swung behind her, "let's get on with some *work*, Miss Darien!"

After leaving the Paragon Miss Baggaley crossed over to the Palatine Gardens Theatre to leave a message at the box office.

Standing by the window was the Chairman. "Hulloa, Mr Forshaw!" she said. "Still around?"

"Where are you off to, dear?" demanded Bob. "Lunching with youth and a good bankin' account?"

"Oh, Mr Forshaw!" giggled Bobo. "I was goin' home."

"Could I persuade you to lunch with me?" asked Forshaw.

"How lovelay, Mr Forshaw!"

"T'meat pies on Central Beach are grand this year, I'm told! Look in till, Bessie, wilta, and tell me if I've half a crown?" Forshaw called through to the girl in the office. He put his head through the window, and there was a murmur, followed by a rustle of paper. Mr Forshaw picked up a handful of pound notes. "Don't tell Mr Zaleski, Bessie!" he said, and turning to Bobo, "I'll be with you in a minute, dear. Go and wait in my car—that black one parked t'other side of road!"

Bobo walked across feeling like a million dollars, and seated herself with dignity in the large, shining car. The next minute a chauffeur in a dark-blue uniform opened the door.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, "but I'm afraid there's some mistake."

"No mistake at all!" said Bobo crushingly. "Mr Forshaw asked me to wait for him in his car."

"Yes, madam, but this is not Mr Forshaw's car. It belongs to the Chief Constable."

Bobo screamed, but luckily Forshaw was at hand to apologize for the little misunderstanding, and to pilot her into his own car, the splendour of which consoled her as she seated herself and set her hat at a killing angle. "Comfortable?" enquired Forshaw, taking the driving seat. "Lucky you came for a ride in't to-day; it goes back to-morrow. They won't wait any longer for t'brass."

"Oh, Mr Forshaw!" giggled Bobo. "This isn't the way to the meat pies, is it?" she added archly as the car swung into Talbot Square and thence sped along North Shore.

"No," agreed Forshaw. "We'll try snack at Hotel Splendide instead."

Bobo kept very still, clutching the buff cushion on which she sat with all her ten fingers. She was afraid that if she moved she might wake.

II

At the lunch-time break in the rehearsal, Derek and Beryl joined Gail and Peter outside the Paragon, and they all four went across to the Winter Gardens to eat in the Renaissance Restaurant.

Led by Gail (who seemed to be the Ariadne of this modern Labyrinth) they entered the baffling maze of corridors with curved glass roofs adorned by hanging ferns and flower-baskets. Skirting, under a gaudy electric sign "Olympia," a vast, covered Amusement Park clanging with roundabouts and rifle-shots, they made their way along an unending series of stalls and slot-machines to where the cabin of a Spanish Galleon gaped below them, its carved ribs lit by romantic yellow lanterns. Turning from this, they mounted a stair leading to a succession of dim apartments, closed at this hour except for transit, which seemed to belong to Des Esseintes' mansion of artificial dreams.

Now they crossed a Spanish patio with gilded gates, open to a mock-sky of blue, beneath which stretched an illusive perspective of distant Andalusian mountains. Then they found themselves in a Gothic Hall displaying oak beams, pendent banners, and a stone fire-place enormous enough to warm the hands of a pantomime Giant. At last, as Gail lifted a curtain, there flashed on them the golden glow of the Renaissance Room, with its tall, arched windows and bas-reliefs of Tritons, wreaths, and winged Sphinxes. Here, between chattering lunch-parties, they passed to the table Derek had reserved for them.

There was a rather sultry silence until the arrival of the cocktails. Then Beryl, who had been watching Gail's expression closely, raised her glass and spoke.

"Here's luck to you, Gail!" she said. "By the way, I didn't leave a powder-puff in your flat, did I? Derek allowed me to use your bedroom glass to put myself straight before lunch yesterday, and I turned a lot of things out of my bag in a hurry."

"No powder-puff," answered Gail curtly.

"Ah! . . . I dropped one or two letters somewhere as well . . . your telegram with them, by the way, Peter! Sorry I never answered it."

"I wired Beryl last week to join me up here if she could," said Peter, with a smile on his face and a feeling of unutterable degradation in his heart. "I offered to try to get her in with me at my digs. As she didn't answer . . . so like her! . . . of course, I didn't expect her to turn up after all."

"This your telegram?" asked Gail, passing a slip of paper from her hand-bag to him. Peter took it and read it over in a low tone? "Can't you come Blackpool? Will try fix you lodgings. Wire flat —SLM! Yes, that's it. You don't need it any more, Beryl, do you?" and he crumpled it with relief and thrust it under the table.

"Then I suppose this is your net, also, Beryl?" said Gail, passing it over. She smiled, and her whole being seemed to lighten.

"Have another drink?" suggested Peter.

"Yes," she said, "I'll have one more gin, a very small one, please."

As she spoke, a stir seemed to run through the room, and Peter, turning round, exclaimed, "Why, here's Jack!"

Followed by Nita, Jack Kelham was forging through the crowded restaurant with a grin on his long face. Every waiter or waitress he passed had a smile for him; calls and greetings came from every table. Peter chuckled. "Jack," he observed to Gail, "starts an electric wave of hilarity wherever he goes. . . . Hulloo, Nita! . . . Can't they find you a table?"

"There'll be one here in a minute, Mr Kelham," said the head-waiter, as a neighbouring party rose to go. "Would you like to join up with your friends?" and before Derek could frame an objection, the two tables had been put together.

"Sit by me, Jack!" called Gail. "Tell us, how are things going with you?"

"Do you mean with the show or at our digs?" enquired Jack, squeezing himself in. "The show's shaping superbly . . . *superbly*! The pier people say already it's going to be the best ever put on there!"

"But as for our digs, dear!" Nita burst in. "It's terrible! It's the last time I take Jack's word for anything! He said they were most comfortable when he was here alone last season. . . . I begin to wonder where he *really* stayed that time!"

"She seems to have got a little queer since then," confessed Jack.

"Queer!" cried Nita. "Why, when I asked her where the bathroom was, she told me 'Locked! Locked!' I said. 'Where do we wash, then?' 'Yo' have your baths Wednesday neet," she answered. 'What!' I screamed, 'and no other time?' 'Eh!' she said, 'yo' must be reet dirty folk to want so many baths, and t'sea at end o' street!'"

"She used to be very obliging," murmured Jack. "What's it like at your place, Peter?"

"Hellish!" answered Peter in a depressed voice. "You're afraid of accidentally moving one of her china dogs, and you hardly dare to sit down on the chairs. I shifted one in the bedroom to hang my trousers over the back, and she was down on me this morning for 'stripping t'room!' She *does* seem to have changed since I stayed with her last."

"Well, mind you don't break anything!" Jack warned him. "Remember the Satsuma vase at Preston, Nita?"

"Why, what happened?" enquired Gail.

"It was an enormous affair on a black stand, filled . . . of course . . . with pampas grass, which seems to be an indigenous crop in these parts," explained Jack. "We had the misfortune to knock it over on our last evening there. We were not in a position to pay compensation—definitely! But we did happen to have a good supply of stamp-paper; so we sat up all night sticking the pieces together, and at last got the vase back on its pedestal looking as good as ever, so long as you didn't touch. Next morning we paid our bill—just, and were leaving the house. But, as I went out, I thoughtlessly let the front-door bang behind me . . . and when she came rushing into the room, all that was left of the Satsuma vase was a cloud of fine gold powder in the air!"

"Poor you!" gurgled Gail.

"Well, I don't see," said Peter, "why you need to break things in other people's houses . . . really I don't. You've only got to be ordinarily careful, you know!"

"Don't be so haw-haw, Peter!" rebuked Gail.

Jack changed the topic. "Bobo Baggaley seems to be going strong," he remarked. "Who do you think I saw her driving with just before lunch? . . . Bob Forshaw, nobody less! Ee, she's a reet bit o' stuff, our Bobo, she is an' all!"

"I warned you, Gail," grumbled Derek, "that you were doing yourself a bit of no good when you got that wench back into the theatre!"

Gail gave a contemptuous shrug. "Am I supposed to be in danger from a girl who has to embroider Mickey Mouse on her knickers to get a laugh?"

"Howdy, folks?" said a voice behind them, and, turning their heads, they saw Monty Du Parc looking at them out of his sad eyes. "Feeling as good as you look, Gail?" he asked. "How do, Vortigern? . . . Peter, what's this I hear about their putting that stuff of Zhar-kov's in place of your waltz in the Blackpool sands scene?"

"What?" cried Gail, aghast.

"I know nothing of it!" declared Peter.

"Well, that's what I hear. You'd better look after yourself, Peter!"

"I will," muttered Peter with a worried look.

"Thank you for the flowers, Monty," said Gail abruptly, as if she had just remembered them.

"Glad you liked them, dear!" Monty's teeth shone. "Well," he slipped into the empty chair beside her from which Derek had risen for a moment to speak to an acquaintance, "this is the day we've both been waiting for, isn't it? I always prophesied stardom for you, Gail, didn't I?"

"You did, Monty. Ta!"

"It was one of my worst heart-breaks when that old villain Vincent stopped you from coming into *I Like You, Lady!*"

"Surely, that story belongs to 'ro66 and all that' by now, doesn't it?" asked Gail flippantly. "Oh, there you are, Derek! Isn't it time I was back at the Paragon?"

"I must be off, as well," said Beryl. "I've promised to go to a dress rehearsal of the Children's Ballet in the Tower Ball-room; Marie Violette and her partner are playing an accompaniment."

Jack Kelham groaned. "Child dancers! That reminds me. I've promised to take my little horror out to tea to-day. . . . You remember her at Brighton, Gail . . . and the Sergeant? She's in our show here again, worse luck! She's taken an absolute crush on her 'Uncle Jack,' as she calls me, ever since I tried to get her sacked from *Dick Whittington*."

"She admires the Clark Gable type already, Jack," suggested Peter.

"She used to expect me to ice-cream-and-bun her, whenever asked," complained Jack, "and here she demands I shall also take her out at eleven to consume sand flavoured with cockles! Do you know what I caught her doing during the panto, by the way? She was staging a sixpenny raffle each week among her fellow incipients for her five shillings pocket-money, and cleaning up a good two pounds for herself each time!"

"Evidently a star in the making!" laughed Peter.

"Yes," assented Jack. "Your successor, Gail!"

"Don't be rude!" said Gail. "Still, I began that way. Derek, come on!"

"I'll walk along with you, Beryl, if I may," said Peter. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Really! You look alarmingly like Will Hay! All right, come and see the ballet with me, if you want to." They took their leave.

"Come up and see us some time at Lowther Avenue, Monty!" said Gail, as she departed with Derek.

Jack Kelham stepped over to Monty. "How are you, old man?" he asked. "You remember me, don't you?"

"Of course," answered Monty with the most unconvincing air in the world.

"I came to see you in 1936, or 1934 was it? About that part at the St Andrew's. We couldn't come to terms."

"Ah!" said Monty. "And . . . er . . . *are you on holiday in Blackpool?*" . . .

Jack Kelham was still dazed from the blow as he found himself walking painfully on his wife's arm towards South Shore under a sullen-looking sky.

"Well," said Nita, interrupting him at last. "You should speak to them about the billing! So far I haven't seen a bill of this show of ours anywhere beyond the entrance to the pier. . . . And don't say, please, 'What has Bobo got that I haven't?' because I'm sick and tired of that one!"

III

But had Jack been able to listen invisibly behind Bobo's back during her lunch with Mr Forshaw, he would have discovered that she was not making such progress with the great man as she believed. Indeed, that young woman was committing the common mistake of the common kind and overplaying her hand.

It began when they sat down in the dining-room of the splendid hotel; the French menu completely stumped her, so she tried to get out of it by saying with a grimace that she didn't see anything she liked—much. Forshaw suggested in turn soup, fish, entrée dishes, joints, chops, steaks and poultry; but to each Bobo had an objection to make until she found she had come to the end of the list. Then she had to climb down and accept Forshaw's selection of steak, which she had been secretly longing for all the time. While they waited for this to be cooked she was unwise enough to follow gin with whisky . . . and Bobo was never mellowed by alcohol, rather the contrary. Old Bob prudently switched her over to beer when the steaks arrived; but in her cloudy condition she tilted her glass over his, so that he had either to wait for another to be done or acquiesce in roast beef and Yorkshire.

Things went more smoothly then until the sweet course, during which Bobo, leaning on her elbows across the table, in order to ogle Bob affectionately out of her blue-shaded eyes, kept flicking spots of ice-cream over his cuffs. Hiding his hands under the table, Bob asked the waiter to take away his ice and bring him a liqueur brandy; almost he began to wish that he had not been so precipitate in encouraging this huzzy. But there was something about the bursting, wriggling vulgarity of Bobo that stirred his old blood more than he cared to own even to himself; and at the same time the sharpened instincts of half a century of showmanship kept whispering to him that there was something here which, if he could "produce" it, would stir mass audiences to a furore.

"Well, I-I-like that!" declared Bobo thickly, letting her ice-cream spoon drop upon the table-cloth.

"Laike what, dear?" enquired Bob, pausing in the lighting of a consolatory cigar. He had just bowed and smiled to the popular platinum star of one of the pier shows.

"You d-drag me out to lunch with you," whined Bobo, as if she had refused a dozen other tempting invitations, "you don't speak a word to me . . . as if I was one of those dumb b-blondes . . . and then you start making passes at that creature over there!"

"Ee, don't be daft, Bobo!" replied Forshaw, "she's an old friend!"

"Well, I jus' d-d-don't wan' to sit here and see you makin' passes at ole f-frien's," said Bobo, turning lachrymose. "I—I'm goin'."

She rose unsteadily to her feet, clutched at the back of her chair, and wisely sat down again.

"What you want, my dear," said Bob, "is a black coffee, and we'll go into lounge for it." He gripped her firmly by the arm and piloted her through the dining-room doors.

He had just succeeded in depositing her in a large arm-chair half-hidden by a palm, and was looking round for a waiter, when to his horror he beheld Zorilda—with only one dog, it is true, but that a highly clamorous peke—disputing with the hall porter, who insisted that Jean should remain in his hutch while her mistress lunched . . . or else that both should lunch elsewhere.

Zoe yielded at last with a bad grace, and as the porter tied Jean up she added, "If you object so much to animals, maybe you'd better have Lizzie, too!"

"What's Lizzie?" asked the porter suspiciously.

Zoe put a hand into her coat pocket, which heaved and stirred; then a squeal was heard, and a gaping red mouth surrounded with fur appeared in her grasp. "My *buji-marooka* from the West African coast," she explained. "I carry her inside my coat here, but if I mustn't bring my wee animals inside, you'd better take hold of her. She can't bite you if you keep your hand in the right place on her neck, just as I'm doing now!"

"You hold that thing yourself!" said the man, retreating hurriedly into his hutch.

"Och, what are you afraid of, you great big man? I'll leave it in the ladies' room, then," and she unwound from her pocket an ordinary brown fur with an artificial fox's mask.

"Eh! well, ah'm . . ." grunted the porter sourly. "But, I heard it squeak, lai-ke!"

"You dreamt it, dear man!" beamed Zoe, putting the fur round her neck.

The porter turned sulkily away, when suddenly the same squeal was heard again, causing him to wheel round in alarm.

"D'you know," said Zoe sweetly, "I'm thinking Arthur Prince will be somewhere in this hotel. . . . Oh, Bob, my adored! And is it you?" she cried, catching sight of him lurking behind the palm.

"How could you desert me and the bairns all these years?" she demanded, floating over the tessellated hall towards him.

"Now, that's enough of that, Zoe!" began Bob grumpily; but Bobo uttered a cry of welcome. "Zoe, dear, come here, do! He's being so unk-k-kind to me!" she shrilled.

"Who is?" enquired Zoe, perching on the arm of Bobo's chair and swinging a white-shod foot like a snow-flake. "That savage brute? Och, I know him only too well!"

"Howd thy hush, Zoe!" growled Forshaw. "What will you take? Coffee with us or a drink? . . . Have you lunched?"

"Not yet," said Zoe, ordering a liqueur brandy. "I was to meet the Duke here, but he's late. I'm afraid he'll not be coming, after all."

"A Duke, Zoe?" enquired Bobo, suddenly sober.

"Ay," chipped in Forshaw. "The Duke of—er—er—"

"Kyleakin—in the Isle of Skye," prompted Zoe.

"Ay, that's it," assented Forshaw. "Hasta met him, Bobo?"

"No," replied Bobo meekly, her shallow eyes enormous.

"Ee, but you should!" declared Bob. "He's a charming youth. Where can Bobo meet the Duke, Zoe, ma luv?"

"Well," gasped Zorilda, "I'm thinking that'll no be so easy!"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," said Bobo peevishly. "I don't need to pinch your boy-friends!"

"Nay, Zorilda's noan so jealous as that," Bob assured her. "Say where Bobo can meet t'Duke, Zoe! . . . Get crackin' now!"

"What's that animal?" screamed Bobo. "Is it under my chair?" for Zoe, kicked on her delicate ankle behind the palm by Bob, had uttered the call of the *buji-marooka* to relieve her pain.

"There's no animal here, dear," answered Zoe, nursing her foot, "except yon great beastie!"—she scowled at Forshaw. "But he's telling you the truth. I des-pise jealousy. . . . Still, I'm not thinking the Duke's staying in Blackpool long this time. So I fear I'll not be having the chance to introjuice you to His Grace."

"Yes, you could . . . to-night!" insisted Forshaw. "He told me he was meeting you at the Empress Ball-room after your show."

"I'm no that sure we'll be there at all!" faltered Zoe.

"You will be there!" Forshaw tapped her on the knee with managerial emphasis. "And the Duke!"

Zoe shrugged her shoulders. "Well, if you say so, Bob, darling," she said, "I wouldna be surprised if the whole House of Peers were to be there. . . . Now, go away, Bob, do!" she added, jumping off the chair with her eyes on the doors. "There's somebody arrived to lunch me."

A large, fat man, with the face of a hippopotamus, had waddled through the glass doors and stood staring dully about him.

"Yon's my real date, Bob," murmured Zoe. "Clear off, I beseech you!"

"Good God!" said Forshaw, rising. "Come along, Bobo! I'll drop you anywhere . . . and thankful!" he added between his teeth.

"It's up to you, Bob, to produce the Duke!" hissed Zoe as they passed.

"Dunnot worry!" said Forshaw.

IV

Neither Beryl nor Peter saw much of the rehearsal of the Children's Ballet. Their heated argument, begun as they walked along to the Tower, continued in the balcony of the Ball-room, where they paced to and fro at the side, while the twin mauve shafts of the top-gallery spotlights clove through the dark expanse of empty seats above, and the red, blue, and gold oblongs of the spot-bar suspended over the arena cast a fairy radiance over the graceful groups of the children on the floor.

Again and again Beryl demanded angrily of Peter why he was such a fool as to come between her and Derek when he knew he wanted Gail. "Why can't you be straight with yourself?" she insisted. "You know you're just crazy about her!"

"Maybe I am," he replied, "but—there are ways of loving."

"No doubt, but this particular one won't suit you indefinitely. It's a pose you won't be able to hold—nor does she respect you for it. Believe me, this 'moth and star' business may be all right at eighteen . . . just possible at twenty-one . . . but you're already past it! You've reached the age when you need reality. You want flesh and blood . . . to be precise—Gail's! Yet when I come along to take Derek off your hands, you have to butt in and make trouble. It just doesn't add up!"

Peter, with an impatient gesture, stepped forward to the back row of the balcony seats and leaned over to watch the ballet. A wreath of small girls in orange tunics, the size of elves from where he stood, was floating in a single circle of light in the middle of the darkened arena. With all their earthy crudities smoothed away by distance and the lighting, they seemed as fragile as the fancy of first love. Peter sighed and turned back to bring his dispute with Beryl to a sharp conclusion. He was resolved to force her to leave Blackpool this evening under threat of disclosing the whole situation to Gail at once—which would be better than leaving it to explode later when it had grown more serious. And in the end his threat prevailed, and he offered to come and help her to get her cases to the train.

It was a hostile leave-taking between them in Central Station, and "I'll make you squeal for this, Peter!" were Beryl's last words as the London express steamed out. Peter's frame of mind was not to be envied as he stepped out of the haphazard collection of sheds with

the dingy brick portico that makes such a surprising portal to Blackpool's splendours.

But this evening there was little of those splendours in evidence. The sullen afternoon had given place to driving rain, and the face of joy-town had changed to an abrupt scowl. Its heavy, tasteless buildings loomed in front of a purple sky thick with storm; its crowds were scurrying into arcades and shop-entrances, bedraggled, and in their damp clothing odorous. As Peter turned up the collar of his thin summer waterproof, the place seemed to him on a sudden cheap and nasty, stripped alike of jollity and glamour. And was Life itself, he wondered with a sick feeling, any different?

He turned right on the front, striding blindly towards North Shore, as though Beryl's words were pricking him like a goad. Was he really losing his big chance of possessing Gail through a sort of bloodless quixotism?

He had lost his head that day when riding with her on the Brighton Downs; she had been angry and he had yielded. Had he not been a fool to do so? If he had stood his ground . . . pleaded his passion with all the fire that raged in him . . . ripped up the web of sentiment, memory, pity, and pride that she mistook for love of her husband . . . wouldn't she have admired him for it? Did she not, in the shifting tissue of her feminine feelings, despise him for obeying her, and hate him for binding her to the cross of duty? . . . Often that thought had tortured him of nights . . . often her look before she turned her face from him to cry against her horse's neck had come back to him with the bitterness of unendurable loss. . . . And was he now repeating the same mistake? Was Beryl right in her vindictive insight?

The storm increased. The wind buffeted Peter out of his course; the rain was soaking through his worn mac; his hat dripped on to his spectacles, blinding him.

Now was the time to admire the courage and tenacity of those tough Victorian planners of a greater Blackpool, who had determined that on this bleak stretch of shore, devoid of any beauty but its wide arc of sky, swept by the biting Atlantic gales, deluged by the Atlantic rain-clouds, gritted by summer sand-storms, there should arise a metropolis of enjoyment which should draw to it all Britain; and who had at their own risk and by their breadth of vision ensured the triumph of the huge design. Peter Warner, however, spared no thought for the Cockers, the Bickerstaffs, the Lindsay Parkinsons, the Beans, and others who had wrought decade by decade at the mighty enterprise. He only knew that he was exhausted with emotion, wet and shivering, and that he needed a drink.

One by one he had passed the grand hotels of the North Shore, the magnificent, crimson Imperial, like the Tuileries, the quadrangular Savoy with its bluish cupola, the Cliffs, with its lavish white-stone

garlands and flat, Eastern-looking dome, and before him the rain beat drearily upon the battlements of a great celebrity's mimic castle. He stood still for a moment to take his bearings, and then sought for Uncle Tom's Cabin, the staid red-brick and stained-glass successor to the old wooden shanty that had stood for years on the crumbling edge of the cliff at the same spot.

Lights and song came through the doors of the inn as Peter approached, and its hall of small tables, when he entered it, was filled with a soberly dressed crowd, shelterers like himself from the rain. But the buzz of talk and laughter that shuttled through the room showed that the weather had caused no depression. White-jacketed waiters, bearing glasses of dark-brown beer in pyramids on trays, slid up and down with the precision of ballet-dancers, turning and twisting to avoid customers passing along the passage-ways, slithering their precious burdens down without a drop spilt, and rushing for a new load almost before the last glass had rung upon the table. At the same time they kept the customers genially but firmly to the laws of the establishment—all drinks to be taken sitting, the litter of sandwich bags to be thrown under the tables, not on them, the singing to be the same song as that which was being given on the small platform at the end of the room by a thin young man at the piano and a stately blonde, who seemed, despite her skirt, to be the queen of all Principal Boys since pantomime began.

Peter found a place at a table near the door by permission of its occupants, an elderly Lancashire artisan and his wife. The man was joining stolidly in the choruses over his beer-glass, as though he were alone; the woman, pale and lined by years of labour, sipped her beer slowly in the rare luxury of sitting down and doing nothing.

Peter had scarcely realized the state he was in until he took off the mouldering wreck that had been his hat, and felt how his trousers, as wet as if he had plunged into the sea, clung to his legs, and how the shoulder-padding of his jacket was sodden beneath his waterproof. He took off his gold spectacles and wiped them with a handkerchief that felt like seaweed.

"Have yo' coom far?" asked the woman, with a maternal smile breaking over her long, thin lips. "Your trousers are damp, yo' know!"

Peter stared at her for a moment, then broke into inextinguishable laughter, in which the old lady joined. So did the people sitting at the next table. Peter could not but feel glad to be the cause of so much happiness.

"What'll you have?" asked a waiter. "Co-old, aren't you?"

"I think a double whisky, as strong as you can make it," suggested Peter.

"That's raight!" agreed the venerable waiter. "Have a beer, to chase it, laike?"

"Everything you've got!" said Peter, and the old lady chuckled again. "Eh, that's a large order!" she said.

"What is?" asked her husband, descending to earth for a moment to notice her. She indicated Peter's plight, and he grinned; then turned back to join in the sonorous news that "The fleet's in port again!"

The whisky, arriving, sent a warm glow through Peter. "Another of those, I think!" he told the waiter, and relaxed in his chair, letting himself be lulled by the solemn chanting all about him. The smoke spirals thickened; the big blonde sent piercing notes through the chorus, and checked any signs of rowdiness among her listeners with a threat from her magnificent arm. Amiable back-chat then ensued, until the waiters called "Order, please!"—and order there was.

From time to time the doors opened to admit strays, who brought in with them a damp, chilly breeze and a glimpse of cloud-wrack fleeting past the cliff-top. Peter judged he had done well to fortify himself with the second double, even though it had made him feel slightly withdrawn and hazy. He let his gaze wander idly over the assemblage, obscured now by the twilight and the smoke. Every minute somebody struck a match, or a petrol-lighter flared, revealing here the tired, hollow-cheeked faces of working age, there the fresh lips, laughing and provocative, of youth, while all the time the choruses swelled up, changing tune but never sentiment. It was ever love, fidelity, dreams—the "blue"—and now as always Peter felt a lump in his throat as he listened.

He must have stayed there nearly an hour, and his clothes by this time were dry, if crumpled. The crowd was more tightly packed than ever; but the pianist tinkled tirelessly on, and while the blonde was taking a brief refreshment, was himself singing in a pleasing baritone. By now the storm had fluttered its angry skirts away, and through the windows could be seen banners of salmon-pink and lakes of pale gold; while fiery gleams from the sinking sun shot across the room, waking transitory spots of colour from purple hats, speckled turbans, burnished curls, and red ties.

Peter felt a healing peace descend upon his soul. What mattered in life, he realized, was not what might happen to you—possession or deprivation, success or failure—but the way you took it. Of the throng around him, how few could be reckoned successful or prosperous, or even lived lives moderately free from trouble and anxiety? Were they any less the salt of the earth for that?

As the form of Gail floated, wraith-like, in his fancy over the gathering, he saw in her the interpreter of the simple dreams of these simple people, and felt his longings go out no longer to her beauty only, but to the generosity and candour that shone through the funny little foibles of the actress. Sitting at a beer-splashed table in this dusky, ugly room, and listening to the indefeasible energy of the North Country voices uplifted in "The Way You Look To-Night,"

he saw that to yield to his sister's insidious urging, and promote her intrigue with Gail's husband for his own ends, would be to reduce his dream to evil-smelling dust.

There was a flash as electric bulbs were switched on in clusters, quenching the enchantment of the half-light. They disclosed worn and ill-made clothes, defects in faces, and untidy wisps of hair. But as Peter stepped out on to the rain-washed cliff drive, still shining underfoot, and saw the Tower rising over the mass of the Baths as if from the green brow of a hill, he was still holding the spell to his heart.

V

The same night, in the Empress Ball-room at the Winter Gardens, with its hexagonal pillars crowned by colossal gold capitols, a Fancy Dress Gala was being held. A carnival of costumes from all periods blended with black dinner-jackets and the simpler lines of modern evening gowns in the rays shed from a forest of crystal chandeliers, while balloons, green, pink, and purple, drifted through gusts of laughter overhead.

Zorilda, in a costume of tight-fitting silvery scales that gave her the look of a small, deliciously elusive fish, sat on a bench under one of the galleries with her "Mamma." It should be explained that "Mamma" was a step-parent, for Zoe's own mother, an adagio dancer, had died when Zoe was a child. In contrast to Zorilda's glitter, Mamma remained faithful to black velvet—that tested window-dressing for making her diamonds plausible. Her masculine face, with its formidable line of jaw, was softened by rouge and eye-black, but seemed all the same to be glowering round the ball-room in search of affront. This glassy stare, so far as one side of her face was affected, it did not lie in Mamma's power to alter. Even her step-children had never discovered that it was due to a misplaced hammer when she parted from her first suitor in her factory days.

"They should be here sune if they're coming," murmured Zoe, twiddling her gilt slippers. "Will you look at Adrienne now, dancin' with that rich old feller from Manchester, with the big car, and the plate that don't fit? You can see it wagging in his mouth! . . . Mamma, would you care for another drink? . . . Victor, take Mamma to the bar!"

The command was addressed to a dark young man with a pleasant grin, standing beside them. He was a member of the cast in Zoe's show, and had come on with her from the theatre. He was prepared to attend her anywhere and carry out any order she gave him, being patiently and stubbornly resolved to marry her one day.

"No, thanks," answered Mamma in a hoarse voice, "I don't want any more beer now. I don't think it'd lie down, Zoe. . . . Those

pickled gherkins keep repeatin' since tea." She tapped her monumental bosom.

"Pickles? It's no the pickles, Mamma," declared Zoe. "'Twas the oysters. I told you not to eat oysters in a month without an 'o' in it."

"Yes, that's what they always tell one," agreed Mamma and hiccupped. "Beg pardon!" she said. "But it wasn't the oysters, though. What's a couple of dozen oysters at Blackpool in June, I'd like to know? I'd be sorry to think *that* could upset me. . . . No, it was the pickles."

"Here comes Bob Forshaw at last!" exclaimed Zoe. "And Bobo with him, all dressed up. . . . Oh, Mamma! you didn't forget to give Musso his dinner before you came out, did you? . . . Coo-ee!"

She waved a balloon tied to her wrist, and Forshaw came towards them with Bobo beside him, looking like a pink meringue in a mass of frills. She had spent the afternoon torturing her hair into falling curls, on to the top of which she had pinned a blue pierrot cap with a white star on it. Her dancing-shoes were wedges coloured in all shades of the rainbow, which was an error, since her feet were not shaped for such a blaze of publicity, any more than was her ankle for the gold bangle emphasizing it.

Greetings were exchanged with Mamma, and with Victor, to whom Bobo showing alarming signs of offering a court curtsy.

"Nay," Forshaw warned her, "that's not t'Duke! That's Victor Stanley. . . . How-do, Victor?"

"Sorray!" mumbled Bobo peevishly, and turned a frilled shoulder that wafted with it a sickening blast of the perfume shop upon the young man.

Victor turned to Zoe. "I say, old girl!" he whispered. "Excuse me a moment, will you? This is more than I can take!"

"All right, Victor," smiled Zoe. "Come back some time! I'll be wanting you."

Suddenly Forshaw pointed to the far end of the long ball-room. "There he is, Bobo, ma luv!" he declared. "I'll go and bring him over."

"What? . . . Who's there?" demanded Zoe.

"The Duke, Zorilda! I'll fetch him across."

"Gudesakes!" gasped Zoe, as Forshaw returned in a minute or two bringing with him a tall, thin man of much dignity, wearing Highland evening-dress with a dark-green kilt and a dirk in his stocking.

"I will be seeing things!" moaned Zoe. "It will never be the Duke himsel'!"

"What's that, Zoe?" asked Mamma fretfully, for she hated to be kept out of secrets.

"Spare me, Mamma! Have you the aspirins with you?"

Meanwhile Bobo was standing fascinated as Forshaw presented her

to the lean, dried-up Scotsman. "How *do* you do?" said the Duke in a grave voice as he bowed over her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, sir!" answered Bobo, blushing beetroot.

"Say, 'Your Grace,' Bobo!" Forshaw prompted her from behind.

"For what we are about to rec—" began Bobo deliriously, but the Duke checked her with a gracious smile, and turned to Zoe. "Ah, Zorilda!" he said, "how *do* you do?"

"Fine!" gulped Zoe. "Your Grace was the last person I expected to see. . . . I thought you would be off after the birds!"

"How *do* you do, madam?" enquired the Duke of Mamma. And as the band began a fox-trot, "Shall we dance, Miss Baggaley?" he asked.

"Thanking yew!" answered Bobo, and almost flung herself into his arms.

As they moved out on to the floor, the Duke treading somewhat heavily upon Bobo's embroidered toes, Zoe whirled upon his introducer.

"What is the meaning of this, Bob Forshaw?" she demanded.

"Eh, Zoe!" Forshaw grinned. "Be a trouper! Play up!"

"I like your cheek, Mr Forshaw. Taking my man from me!"

"Don't be daft!" Forshaw's grin widened.

"There's nothing for you to grin about, I'd have you know! You bring Erchie here . . . after making him sloshed, I can tell that from his eyes . . . and you introjuice that little two-bit piece from your rotten second show, not even one of *us* . . . and send her dancing with my financy! . . . Mamma, gie me your handkerchief!"

"What on earth is the matter, Zoe?" asked Mamma irately. "What are you crying about?"

"Mamma!" sobbed Zoe. "They're trying to take my Erchie from me!"

"Eh, howd your hush now, Zoe!" growled Forshaw. "You're spoilin' everything. For God's sake dunnot start howlin'; everybody's lookin' at us!"

"And what the hell d'you think I care?" sobbed Zoe. "It's my life, isn't it? . . . That's what you're ruining, and you t-t-tell me not to h-h-howl!" she ended on a note that a werewolf might have envied.

There was by now a gathering circle round them, staring curiously, while dancing couples began to sway in place in their corner, not wishing to lose the sight. To his horror, Bob Forshaw heard his name whispered by the crowd. "Oh, God!" he murmured. "We'll have M.C. down on us this road! . . . Zoe, come to the bar, wilta?"

"Now you're talking!" declared Zorilda, brightening and thrusting Mamma's handkerchief into her bosom. "But don't think you're getting away with it, Bob Forshaw! . . . I demand explanations—in full! Wait here, Mamma, will you, darling? . . . Here's Victor come back to take care of you!" She clutched the young man by the sleeve almost before he had released his dancing partner.

"Oh, damn!" said Victor, when he heard his assignment. "This is too bad of you, Zoe! Where are *you* off to, then?"

"I'll be back in—in—half an hour!" Zoe called over her shoulder, as she went off arm-in-arm with Forshaw towards the bar.

"What?" cried Bob, stopping in his tracks, aghast. "Victor! Victor! Wait for us! We're only having a quick one!"

"That's what *you* think!" Zoe pinched his arm viciously. "I've a lot to say to you, Mr Forshaw. . . . Victor, I'll dance with you as many times as you wish when I come back!"

"That's a date!" cried Victor, cheering up. "All right! I'll take care of pistol-packing Momma till you come back."

"Don't be saucy, Victor! I won't have Mamma called out of her name! . . . Come on, Bob; you can't get away!" She gripped Forshaw, who had made an attempt to wriggle out of her hold, with her pointed nails, and dragged him off towards the blue-and-white marble staircase leading down to the Indian lounge.

"Do you know," Bobo said to the Duke, as they fox-trotted together on the crowded floor, "you dance just like an ordinary min?"

"Really, my dear?" answered the Duke. "Did you expect anything different?"

"I dunno. . . . I s'pose I did, sort of, you know. . . . I felt so nervous when you asked me—I thought Dukes were so different from ordinary men."

"Oh, dear no, I assure you!" he told her in his deep voice. ("Sorry, cock!"—this was an aside to a man he had bumped into.) "I assure you," he repeated, "that we are quaiite like other men . . . especially when we have the pleasure of meeting an exceptionally charming gairrl!"

"A what?" asked Bobo.

"A—a—charming young lady like yourself!"

"Oh, I see!" she answered in a disappointed voice. "I thought you were callin' me something wonderful."

"Well, and aren't you wonderful, my dear?"

"If yew say so!" She nestled up against his chest, but the dance ended abruptly, and they had to rejoin their party.

The Duke delivered Bobo to a seat, and then turned to Zorilda, just back with Bob Forshaw from an expensive tour of the neighbouring bars. "Shall we dance?" he enquired.

"I thank your Grace," retorted Zoe, with her nose in the air, "but I have promised this one to Mr Stanley." Victor did not wait to be asked twice.

"I'm sorry, Erchie," said Zoe to the Duke with crushing condescension, as she took the young man's hand. "No doubt you will console yourself!"

Bobo, with a triumphant grin, made room for the Duke beside her. "Come on, Archie!" she giggled. "Console yourself here!"

"Ay," growled Bob Forshaw, "but who the devil's going to console me? I've never been to a hop that's cost me so mooch brass!"

"With your permission, sir," said the Duke, with that deference so becoming from youth to age, "I think that this young lady and I will dance again."

"Ay, dance tha' head off!" snapped Forshaw. "That at least will cost me nowt!" He sat puffing moodily at his cigar.

"All alone, Mr Forshaw?" enquired Mamma with a pallid gleam of cement tooth-stoppings. "Are your dancin' days done?"

"You bet they are, Mamma!" replied Forshaw, rising hurriedly and disappearing into the crowd.

"Eevasive, aren't you?" said Bobo almost petulantly to the Duke, after he had avoided answering yet another of her questions about the ducal mode of existence and the addresses of his various castles and mansions. "Highly eevasive, I must say!" she repeated and sniffed.

"I beg to apologize, Miss Baggaley," said the Duke humbly. "My batsman must have been using that cheap moth-ball again!"

"Oh, I didn't mean *that*! I'm sure you must know I didn't mean *that*. I mean, you're so secreteive, Archie!"

"What is it you wish to know?"

"Well, tell me something about the grouse moors!"

"The Grousemoors? . . . Well, you must understand they're a very ancient family, Miss Baggaley, and——"

"Oh, don't be funny! You know I mean the shootin'."

"Ah, yes, the shooting! . . . Well, what am I to say? . . . The grooms bring the horses round——"

"Go on! You don't shoot grouse from horseback, surely?"

"Of course not! What a humorous idea! We ride to the pitch."

"Pitch!"

"Naturally! You must rent a pitch beforehand. The ghillies put up the stand the night before."

"What do you want a stand for?"

"To lean the rifles on, of course! Then, when the ladies and gentlemen arrive and dismount, the ghillies load the rifles for them, to see they don't take more shots than they're entitled to. Everyone is allowed twelve shots as a rule."

"Only twelve?"

"It's a very expensive sport, Miss Baggaley. I always give my guests a free half-dozen. Most hosts have to charge . . . anything up to a guinea a shot."

"Whyever so much?"

"To pay for the prizes. The prizes are superb! Diamond brooches and clocks for the ladies. . . . Cigars and nut—nut-crackers, silver

ones, for the gentlemen. The ghillies see that the birds keep passing in a straight line, and you have to knock their heads off to win a prize. . . . I say, Miss Baggaley, it's very thirsty talking, isn't it? What about a drink?"

"I wonder if you're tellin' me the truth," said Bobo suspiciously. "It didn't look a bit like that in the pictures I saw in the papers."

"Ah! Was the shooting in those pictures East or West Coast?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say."

"It makes a tremendous difference. On the West the tide comes in so quickly the rules are not at all the same. My estates are in the East. You must visit me there some day!"

"Stay at your castle, Duke! . . . What a dream!"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Baggaley. . . . Now, *do* let me take you for a drink!"

By the time the band played "God Save the King," Bobo, though somewhat squiffy, was elevated to heaven, since it appeared certain that she had knocked the Duke hard. As for Bob Forshaw, she did not care two hoots for him any longer; she did not even trouble to thank him, when they parted, for the introduction. As for her friend Zoe—she could look out for herself! People who were so careless as to leave a nobleman lying about were asking for it—weren't they? Bobo ignored Zoe's reactions . . . and Mamma's, too, if she had any. Actually Mamma, whose affliction had gained on her during the evening, was now being shaken with such gusts as to be able to think only of peppermint.

"Come on, now, Adrienne!" said Zoe severely, to her dark-eyed younger sister. "Don't pout at me, you grave-robber!"

It had been a very full as well as a very brilliant night in the Empress Ball-room, and the out-pressing crowd in the corridors and round the exits of the Winter Gardens was dense. Our party, after a while, was brought to a standstill in the Floral Hall by cross-currents from the Galleon and the other restaurants. Both Bobo and Mamma began to get fretful, not to say resentful. The Duke, however, was equal to the situation.

"Pass along, there, please!" he called out in his deep, resounding voice. "Keep moving, *please!* Don't block the passage-ways! Keep moving, *if* you please!"

It was surely the native authority of rank that did it! The crowd soon got moving again.

Outside, while Victor ran in search of the taxi they had ordered, Zoe soothed Mamma. "Don't be cross, darling!" she pleaded; "there's one thing I can tell you! Bob Forshaw has promised to raise me ten pounds a week for the run. . . . Will you be thinking of that now?"

CHAPTER THREE

I

A FORTNIGHT later the *Blackpool Breezes* Company were assembled in the stalls of the Palatine Gardens Theatre in the morning to hear the last "notes" of their producer before the opening that evening. When Inman had delivered these and briefly tried over any last-minute business or cuts, he would disappear until after the final curtain-fall that night, and the company would have the rest of the day free, to get their hair done, or rest, or otherwise while away the hours of suspense before they returned to the theatre in the evening to dress.

Peter Warner sat at the back of the stalls, vaguely listening to the murmur of Inman's voice, rising from time to time in sharp emphasis. In that fortnight what ups and downs of hope and fear he had been through! He had been alarmed that first day in Blackpool when Monty had warned him that one of his precious five numbers might be taken out, but had discovered that he had no real reason for his alarm. (That was a rather annoying trick of Monty's—always to be frightening you with hints of coming trouble; Peter supposed he did it out of anxiety on his friends' behalf.) Then he had heard his songs, "The Park Nobody Knows," "Castles in the Sand," "I Got that Lytham Rhythm," and the others taking on life and enchantment as Gail felt her way into them, and hope had soared to the ceiling. Even the irritation of watching Bobo Baggaley's wretched nonsense "Crazy Katie" being built up into importance to please Forshaw had not gone deep.

Then there had been the exciting foretastes of the big production numbers and their scenic sensations; and then the horrible ordeal of last night's dress rehearsal, which had not ended until close on two in the morning. It had exhausted everybody, and had left Peter convinced that no audience could possibly be impressed by what now seemed to him the feeble tinkle of his melodies—"reminiscent tinkle, too," he had bitterly told himself in that shivering hour.

Now he was waiting for this final briefing to end before taking Gail to lunch, as they had arranged before separating at 2 a.m. Derek would not be with them, because two days ago, it appeared, the amiable Mr Stulitzer had sent him a wire about a part in a forthcoming Tchekhov revival in a near-West End theatre, and he had had to dash to London. He would be back late this afternoon, just in time to see his wife's triumph.

Ever since the affair of the telegram Derek had, so far as Peter had been able to observe, shown a gentler mood to his wife; and she had responded to any sign of affection from him with a warmth which,

though it wrung Peter to see, he would have been shutting his eyes to deny. Well, Derek had reason to show penitence; and if Gail hoped for the renewal of his love, what sort of part would Peter be playing if he sought to discourage her? . . . Meanwhile, the question was simply where he should take her to lunch, out to the Rotonda in quiet, or somewhere nearby, so that she might get home quicker to rest.

II

Actually Mr Warner would have been better advised to spend at least a little thought upon another question—where he was to sleep that night. Before going home after the dress rehearsal, Gail had insisted, in disregard of his protests, upon leaving him at his digs in one of the turnings off Hornby Road. They had been held up by some little trouble in starting the car, and Peter had blackened his fingers with grease getting her going with the handle. As soon as he had seen Gail drive off he had put the latch-key he had borrowed into the door with exaggerated precaution against noise, for Miss Bingley had warned him that her sister and her husband were stopping the night, and that "Gladys was a light sleeper."

"A light sleeper," Peter reminded himself while closing the front door as though it had been made of egg-shell. Then he felt his way, without turning on the hall-light (it might awaken Gladys through the skylight over her door) into his sitting-room, and reached for the switch there. It was not quite where he judged it would be, and he began to make circles in the air, groping for it. It showed the malicious elusiveness of inanimate objects at such junctures, and Peter, tired, hungry, and nervous, began to grow impatient—so impatient that he forgot he was grabbing at the air just over a cabinet that bore three of Miss Bingley's glass dogs.

"Damn the thing!" he muttered at length, and made a vicious clutch at emptiness. . . . There was a terrible grating sound, and before Peter could catch anything there was a smash on the floorboards, as the first of the glass dogs went down in wreckage. It would have been wiser not to try to save it, for the next moment Peter's shaking fingers sent the dog's mate to join him in smithereens. He snatched back his hand as though it had been stung, only to hear a crash on the other side of the cabinet as the third dog spun to destruction.

Peter stood for a moment trickling with sweat, afraid to move. Then he heard the switch on the landing go on, and the hall outside was flooded with light. "What's that?" shrilled a dreaded voice from above. "What are yo' up to?" A heavy foot began to descend the stairs.

Concealment was useless; so, as the infernal switch that had caused

all the trouble was now clear enough in the rays from the hall, Peter turned it on, and his sitting-room sprang into full view. He gasped. He had forgotten, while fumbling for the light, the coat of black grease on his hands from Gail's car. Now he perceived that the pink and blue roses of Miss Bingley's wall-paper bore the damning evidence of his finger-prints. "My God!" he whispered, looking from the blurred smears on the wall to the carpet on which the severed head of one of the dogs seemed to be snapping in death-agony at his ankles.

Miss Bingley cast one glance round at the havoc and burst into tears. Seeing her feel in vain for a handkerchief in her dressing-gown, Peter, cooing inane apologies, offered her his. Again he had forgotten that in the car he had spent some minutes trying to get the grease off his fingers on to it. Miss Bingley's cheeks now showed how far he had been successful.

"Take that filthy thing away!" she screamed, hurling it back at him. "Ee! you clumsy elephant . . . what do yo' want cavortin' into a decent woman's home to ruin it? . . ."

She filled in her word-picture of Peter in some detail, and he bore it humbly. He did not even protest when the damages were assessed at inflationary rates. What really made him feel cold inside was the ultimate sentence that, as soon as he had paid for what he had done, he could look for new rooms in the morning.

"But you've got me all wrong, Miss Bingley, you have, you know!" he pleaded. "I'm not one of these careless chaps that goes breaking things in other people's houses; definitely, I'm not!"

"Eh, then yo' go an' be careful in someone else's house," she retorted, trembling with passion, "soon as ever 'tis daylight! Yo' can pay and get out before breakfast. I've cooked last meal I'm makin' for you!"

"I say, you can't do that to me!" protested Peter. "I'll never find anywhere to stay in Blackpool at such short notice. Everywhere's full up, you know!"

"I should worry!" declared Miss Bingley. "Chargin' in like a daft rhinoceros! . . . If yo' don't go quietly, my brother-in-law'll put you off premises. He's a furniture remover!"

"I shan't pay!" quavered Peter.

"Pollis 'ull see tha' pays, lad! . . . Comin' in dead-droonk into a respectable house!"

"I'm not drunk!" In his weariness Peter clutched at the back of a padded chair. Miss Bingley snatched it from him, lest he should defile it also. He staggered and nearly overbalanced. "Can't even stand!" commented Miss Bingley.

Peter despairingly passed his hands over his face, reappearing in the character of a Christy minstrel. "I can't argue any more now," he said. "I'm dead-beat."

"Dead-droonk, tha' means!"

"I'm NOT!" Peter bellowed.

"Don't go wakin' up my sister and her 'oosband!" shrieked Miss Bingley.

"No, no! Of course not!" Peter tried to regain his control. "They mustn't be disturbed! Now please, Miss Bingley, dear, let us two go to bed like them! . . . No, I don't mean exactly that. I mean, let's go to our rooms, and we'll discuss the whole thing in the morning."

"I'm noan discussin' any more wi' you, Mr Warner. . . . You'll go!" said the inflexible landlady.

III

Surely Peter should have been preoccupied with the fact that in the morning Miss Bingley had been as bad as her word; that he had had to deposit his luggage in the station cloak-room, and wait for an early café to open before getting his breakfast. But all the care he gave to his predicament was to make a funny story of it to amuse Gail while they lunched in the Tower Restaurant. She was unsympathetic. "Teach you not to be so snooty another time!" she reminded him. "Why, poor Jack's a mere amateur with his Satsuma vase. Why didn't you strike a match—?"

"Mercy!" Peter bowed his head.

"And what'll you do to-night?" asked Gail.

"I'll get in somewhere . . . with Jack and Nita perhaps. . . . Or sit up in the theatre with the fireman. Don't worry! . . . I suppose you're off to lie down now?"

"Lie down? And have all the things that could possibly go wrong to-night running round and round like mice in my head?" She gave a brittle laugh. He had noticed how her eyes burned, and how she could not keep her hands still. "I'd come down to the theatre with straws in my hair if I did that!" she said. "No, you've got to take me somewhere where I can't think about it at all. Then I'll be 'all right on the night'!"

"Where shall we go, then?"

"Any silliness! . . . Pleasure Beach . . . switchbacks . . . donkey-rides—no, I suppose I *am* too big for that. . . . Punch and Judy, if you like, though that's theatre, too—anywhere!"

"What about a taxi to Pleasure Beach, then?"

"Later! There's a heap of shows quite close to here, isn't there? . . . We must do *everything*!"

"If you want to chew rock, I warn you, you can buy your own!"

"Mean, aren't you? Let's start!"

As she passed out before him on to the swarming front, he was struck once more by the clear-cut way in which she was marked off from the throng through which she flashed on her low-heeled shoes of laced black suede. They, like her green crêpe dress, like her white

hat and white leather bag, did not seem such things as could be bought in shops; any more than her hair or her complexion seemed to belong to the world of Nature or the cosmetic counter. At the most distant glimpse you could tell Gail for an actress; yet every one of her audacities of dress and make-up was triumphantly successful.

Peter dodged through the throng, seeking to come up with her. Blackpool was already much fuller than when they had arrived a fortnight ago; yet neither the infection of the crowd-spirit, nor the increasingly fantastic headgear of the girls, the louder and louder sports jackets of the youths, nor the exhilaration of a sunny afternoon only slightly freshened by the breeze, could inspire this serene and orderly throng with riotousness. Where it coagulated round tram-stops or the entrances to shows and tea-shops, the personnel, trained, authoritative, and kindly, kept easy order, needing no sterner suasion than the threat, 'Yo' won't get in at all if yo' shove!'

Police are almost invisible in Blackpool; only rarely is a spiked helmet to be seen gliding along a wall or halted on a traffic island, its wearer as composed as a country constable in a village high street. Control is the affair of the flat-capped traffic wardens, standing in a line to wave the cars along the front, of the plum-cuffed attendants of the Tower and Winter Gardens, of the silver-badged tramway staff, and all the thousands of residents trained from generation to generation to handle crowds, and—what is so much better!—content them. There is no sour satisfaction here in telling you "Full up!" Living to entertain, and entertaining to live, they squeeze the customer in, wherever the properties of space and matter make it possible.

Without obstruction, then, Peter rejoined Gail on the corner of Adelaide Street. "Come along!" she called, waving her white leather bag as a signal, "you're getting middle-aged, Peter, darling!"

They crossed over and proceeded along Central Beach, past the array of noisy side-shows that line the front there.

"What's going on here?" asked Gail, standing on tiptoe to see over the shoulders of a crowd round a circular table loaded with a gaudy pile of presents. Here was played a complicated game with coloured balls and numbers, presided over by a young man in a college cap. He had curly hair, a fine profile, a tanned complexion, and the most engaging smile in the world. Only a trick of slightly drooping one eyelid suggested a certain "awareness." His manner in addressing the onlookers was a blend of the perfect host, the Revivalist preacher, and the prudent business adviser. As he spoke, slowly, confidentially, in the hoarse tones of a profession that has never—Heaven knows why—thought it worth while to acquire the art of voice production, he demonstrated with irresistible force that failure to take part in the next game would be discourtesy to him, indifference to salvation, and neglect of easy money. The sun streamed down, irradiating his handsome face with the one drooping eyelid; the wind softly

tapped the upturned faces of the listeners with its salt, invigorating fingers; the realm of dreams seemed near and the world of hard reality remote.

Peter pulled Gail by the arm, as she searched her bag for silver. "Be your age!" he remonstrated. "You, in the show business, to fall for this spiel!"

"The spieler's a genius," she retorted, "and *somebody* has to win—haven't they?" (That was incontrovertible, and everybody cannot win, even at Ascot.) "Besides," Gail added irrelevantly, "*he is* so attractive!"

Did the young man hear her? Anyhow, he looked straight over the heads of the crowd in her direction, and lifting his mortar-board, said, "I should like the young lady over there to play with us. Won't she take the red ball?"

Somebody else got the red ball before Gail (to which she afterwards attributed her ill-luck), but she played the yellow—with a furious spin—and lost.

"Very good effort by all!" smiled the young man. "In fact," he went on, "I think I will give two extra prizes! I would like those who had the following numbers to take a free ball in the next game. . . ."

Peter succeeded in dragging Gail away at last, repeating incoherently, "I nearly won! . . . I nearly won!" but had to release her while she hung fascinated over a flat-topped glass case inside which sinister-looking steel arms hovered over a moving turn-table covered with prizes. The competitor's task was, by manœuvring a handle, to induce one of these robot hands to clutch a scent-bottle or some other knick-knack as it passed, and lift it off the table. People have been known to win at this game—people have been known to gain Income Tax reliefs!—but Gail was not one of these favourites of fortune, and was soon hunting for the man with the bag of change to get silver for a pound note.

"My God!" exclaimed Peter. "So all these stories about the mad extravagance of stars are true!"

They passed a popular café, ennobled by a dome which disclosed as they went by that it had a front but no back, and presently, "D'you want to visit the Flea Circus?" Peter asked.

"No, thank you!" Gail shuddered. "I know, of course, they can't escape without being shot by attendants with elephant guns. . . . Still, I twitch for hours afterwards!"

"They have some very talented artists this year, I believe." Peter hovered over the pay-box.

"Go in, then, if you must! And take the leading lady out to supper afterwards!"

"Jealous? . . . There's no need: *she* doesn't sing my songs!"

"Don't remind me of that! What am I here for? . . . Come away from that slot-machine, you dirty old man, and entertain me!"

Peter turned from fingering the handle of a combination of "try your strength" machine and peep-show, which bore the figure of a dancer with the promise, "The more you grip, the more you strip!" and they loitered on past stalls piled with pink rock, past cockle barrows and ovens on wheels, from which poured bushels of fresh crisps, while mounds of meat pies grew under the fingers of white-capped girl cooks. In the throng that swirled past them, nearly everybody seemed to have a choc-ice or an ice-cream cornet to their lips, and jaws moved in a steady rhythm.

Suddenly they were enveloped in a loud-voiced whirlpool. The voice was Jack Kelham's; the whirlpool consisted of Nita, Ilka, and two other foreign girls, formerly of Wanda Gynn's troupe, now appearing in another show in Blackpool; a small child with made-up cheeks, a straight, low-cut fringe and white socks, in whom it was not difficult to recognize Jack's child dancer; and, loitering behind the group, Harry Randolph, an eccentric trick-cyclist—on stage a whirl of dislocated limbs, off it a quiet, spectacled youth with a racing special always in his hand.

"Hulloa, Professor!" cried Jack, his face a map of mirthful lines. "Come to see the scream of the season? Epstein's 'Jacob,' or 'The Lobster and Whisky Nightmare'! You mustn't miss it!"

"Do you want to see it?" Peter enquired of Gail.

"If you like. I've heard so much about this man Epstein. What's he getting at really?"

"D.T.'s, I should say!" affirmed Jack blithely. "He really ought to pull up before he sees rats with pink feathers and mandrills doing fan-dances."

"Jack!" warned Nita.

"Must you pick up everything I say by the wrong end? . . . Well, come along, my lot! . . . Cook's party this way, please! . . . What's the matter, Maureen?"

The infant prodigy licked her fingers after throwing away the paper of the choc-ice she had been sucking. "Oh, Jack! I want to go and buy some rock!" she pleaded with a grin intended to be bewitching.

"Okedoke!" Jack felt in his pocket, while Nita frowned and shook her head. "Where's Harry?" he asked. "Harry!" he bawled after the dawdling Eccentric.

"Oh, let him be!" said Nita. "He's still worrying about the 3.30. He'll follow on in time."

"Come on, Peter!" said Gail. "Me for the fan-dancing mandrills."

IV

They went past a pay-box into what had been the front room of a Victorian villa. The walls were coloured a garish pink, and in the

middle, beneath a harsh electric light, Epstein's giant dreamers rose in their lovely, translucent stone to the blare of a gramophone.

For a moment Gail stared bewildered at the barbaric moulding of the lower limbs; then her eyes were caught by the face of the wrestling Angel and by the sensitive tenderness of the massive fingers supporting the back of the failing Patriarch.

"Oh!" she sighed. "But why *here*?"

"Exactly!" Peter glanced round at the tawdry oil-paintings on the walls and at the peep-shows exhibiting through binocular orifices such tasty tit-bits as desiccated "Siamese twin" infants and the shrunken heads of aboriginal scalp-hunters' victims. "Democracy's a grand thing," he murmured, "but sometimes it irks."

Suddenly it seemed to him that the two majestic beings beneath the glaring light, so alive in their stillness, so perceptibly breathing within their sheath of marble, were suffering captives in this prison of vulgarity. . . . And were they the only ones in the room? The slender girl, with the folds of her green dress falling about her as she gazed up entranced at the statues, wasn't she, too, encaged? Wasn't she encircled by a rout of mouthing monstrosities, exhibited to draw the pence of the unregenerate mob, exploited by the Zharkovs and Zaleskis of the world for their own profit, pedestalled in a temple of sleek and showy decoration?

"What's wrong?" asked Gail, noticing his expression.

"Oh, nothing that matters! . . . Only, sometimes, I wonder if I really like Blackpool. . . . Let's get out of here!"

Outside, the spectacle of three children standing hand in hand in breathless ecstasy while their mother bought rock at a stall for them restored his content. He winked at them as he passed.

In a few minutes the white-tiled front, striped with blue and red Egyptian patterns, of the local Tussaud's attracted Gail, and she paused before it.

"You won't get me in there!" Peter warned her.

"Are you right, Peter?" she asked. "What a shame! I was going to treat you!"

"I've a thing about wax-works . . . have had ever since I was a kid. Don't ask me why!"

"All right! I won't spoil your afternoon. . . . Actually, I don't think these Chambers of Horrors are so hot myself. I went into one of them once . . . I forget in what town . . . and nearly passed out when a voice started moaning in a dark corner. Of course, it was only a record, but I didn't like it a little bit, and I was thankful to tag on to a large family of children doing the round ahead of me. . . . Not so thankful when, just as we were all peering into the pit with the pendulum, to see the blood-marks on the victim, I suddenly found my own hand all covered with gore! . . . I screamed the place down;

but it was only the little boy's raspberry tart, which he'd put down on the ledge beside me while we leaned over together."

"Two horrid kids! . . . Look, this is something for you!"

He pointed to a large building with FAIRYLAND inscribed upon its façade. Squeezing into a car with open seats in the portico, they were borne forward into a cavernous blackness, irradiated from time to time by bursts of light that revealed papier-mâché dwarfs smiling and waving at the passengers from rocks above, toiling in mines or smithies, drinking with jerky gestures outside rustic taverns. Presently, as they journeyed deeper into the heart of the mountain, the mystic glimmer suffused pools where waxen fairies with wings waltzed solemnly on lily leaves to the nostalgic tinkle of musical-boxes.

How time stood still, Peter thought, in the world of the fair-ground! Epsteins might whirl across it like disturbing meteors; yet just these foolish things—the scares of the Chamber of Horrors, the prettiness of flaxen-haired fairies—which had stirred and delighted the children of the Victorian Age, still stirred and delighted the children of to-day; you could hear them squealing their joy from the car ahead. And the same foolish things would continue to enchant the children of the coming centuries, transmitting an unchanging thrill from generation to generation!

His reveries were broken in upon by a raucous voice that sounded all too familiar. Gail recognized it, also, and turned to him in dismay. When they reached the next illuminated tableau, Peter peered ahead, and caught a glimpse in the car running before theirs, as it turned a corner, of Bobo Baggageley's flaunting red curls. A minute later, as they stepped off into sunshine that seemed prosaic for all its brightness, they saw Bobo walking ahead of them in company with Zoe, Mamma, Cousin Julie and a tall, thin man in plus-fours and a tam-o'-shanter.

"Oh! Daddy! Give me that!" murmured Gail at sight of the Duke.

"Let them go on!" whispered Peter. "We'll take this!" and he hailed a barouche by the kerb. "Lovely!" murmured Gail, as she skipped in and leaned back upon the worn cushions, unconsciously taking the pose of a Ouida heroine. The horse clopped off towards Pleasure Beach, which slowly enlarged its weird skyline of towers, wheels, and aerial runways as they drew near, while beyond it the flat coast opened out into hazy distance beneath the pale sky . . . an infinity of tiny red terraces fading to pink, as though the whole world were one small-villadom, serene and holiday-conscious.

V

On the main stem of the Pleasure Beach the going was slow, by reason of the density of the throng, which moved at caterpillar pace, loosening and coalescing again, laughing and calling to itself. A

terrific clamour beat upon the ears from the barkers of the side-shows and stalls, which stretched away in alleys to right and left like the labyrinth of an Oriental bazaar. With this blended the crack of rifles, the thud of balls against dummies, the whistles of miniature locomotives, the demoniac yells and laughter from Ghost Trains horrifying their passengers with skeletons, clutching hands, and clinging cobwebs, the shrieks of females whose skirts were blown up about them inside the rocking Noah's Ark with its painted wooden effigies; and, dominating all, the rattle and hurtle of the giant switchbacks—the Big Dipper, the Grand National and the rest—as they tossed their patrons (or victims?) through the air and shot them spinning into abysses like the headlong falls of nightmare . . . each device a miracle of mathematics and engineering that made disaster impossible by calculated inches.

Gail shivered. "*Their* pleasure!" she commented as she watched the beetle-like cars scaling the sides of precipices before discharging their screaming loads into space. "It must shake them!" she added, but Peter smiled, recalling how the only time he had ventured himself on one of these rides the two seats in front of him had been occupied by a mating couple who had succeeded in remaining throughout the crazy transit locked in a single kiss. Psychology, he fancied, had its say as much as the laws of matter and motion in these contrivances, and he could imagine the zest with which these bacchantes of aerial intoxication would continue their courting on the homeward way.

Abruptly he found himself encircled again by Nita and the other members of her party. They were watching a system of circular bowls, each made to carry two passengers, which were raised by a cog railway to a canvas summit gay with daubed flowers, and then sent with a rotatory motion down a series of zigzags in the mountain-side.

"What have you done with Jack?" enquired Peter.

"He's on that thing!" answered Nita grimly. "The rest of us weren't so mad about it."

"I wanted to go with Uncle Jack!" mumbled Maureen over the head of her Blackpool Rock stick.

"Yes, well, Uncle Jack didn't want *you*!" retorted Nita. "He has all he wants, as it is!"

Peter followed her look, and discerned his friend with the bewitching Ilka just whirling by in one of the tubs, and they certainly did seem to him to be rather more closely mixed up than the laws of matter in motion by themselves could be invoked to justify. When they were discharged at last through the delivery door, there was a self-satisfied grin on Ilka's broad-cheeked face that Peter felt would have prompted him to assault if he had been a wife.

"Ilka wants another go!" announced Jack cheerfully. "What a glutton for punishment!"

"I want to go!" wailed Maureen.

"Be quiet!" snapped Nita. "And, Jack, do you think the rest of us want to pass the whole blessed afternoon watching you and Ilka rolling about up there like a couple of sausages sizzling in a pan? Come along! . . . Harry! . . . Where's Harry? . . . Oh, do stop making marks on that newspaper and keep with us!"

Gail and Peter followed them past an oddly pathetic-looking orchestra of artificial animals wheezing music in a minor key on a show-front; then Gail held him back a moment to listen to an exquisite black-haired gipsy girl with high cheek-bones and full, carmined lips, extolling in a delicately hoarse voice the attractions of a small Theatre of Mystery.

"Let's shoot a bob!" urged Gail. "She says it's just going to begin."

"Have you never heard that before? Come on! You've seen the best of that show on the outside."

"Don't you want your fortune told from the sand?"

"I'd only learn that I was going to 'succeed in the business I had undertaken!'"

"So you will!" And I should hear that 'a big change was coming into my life because of a tall dark man!'"

"Monty Du Parc—obviously!"

She made a face at him.

The next minute, before they could escape, they had run slap into Bobo Baggailey and her party—Zoe, Mamma, Julie, and the strange, lean man with short side-whiskers and the tam-o'-shanter.

"Why, Pe-e-eter!" exclaimed Bobo's voice, its knife-edge steeped in false honey. "Meet the Duke! Archie, this is Peter Warner. . . . Miss Gail Darien, the Duke of Kyleakin!"

"How *do* you do?" said the Duke to Peter. "How *do* you do, Miss Marian?"

"Darien!" corrected Peter.

"*Ça ne fairien!*" murmured Gail. She had met the odd introduction with her usual acceptance, with the charming courtesy she always had ready for everybody she encountered. She fell into step with the Duke on the other side from Bobo. Peter dropped back upon Zoe, who took his arm affectionately. "What on earth's all this, Zoe?" he demanded. "What did that chap call himself?"

"Don't you know? 'Tis the Duke! The Duke of Kyleakin!"

"Of how much?"

"Don't you know the place, man o' my heart? Kyleakin, in the Isle of Skye?"

"The Duke of Skylarkin', in fact! . . . What's the big idea?"

"Don't ask me, darling. Ask Bob Forshaw!"

"Oh, I see! It's one of old Bob's wheezes! But surely even Bobo isn't such a little fool as to believe——"

"How would I know? I only know my heart's broken. I thought

I was the Duke's choice. If you hadn't come back to my shattered fireside, husband——"

"Oh, pack it up, Zoe, please!"

"Now, don't be getting all hot and bothered, sweetheart! Gail's not minding you the least wee bittock, now. She too has eyes only for the Duke!"

"You do blether, Zoe!" growled Peter, hurrying her forward none the less past a row of wooden clowns' heads turning derisively from side to side upon a booth.

"Will you be thinking of Mamma's poor feet?" remonstrated Zoe, hanging back on him. "Mamma!" she cried over her shoulder. "Cheer up! You shall sune have your nice cup o' tea!"

"Not here, I won't, Miss!" grunted Mamma, as she limped behind. "I want my proper tea at home, I do!"

"Then you should have bought some more rum this morning," answered Zoe. "Hulloa, here's Harry Randolph, the Plastocine wonder! Put that paper down, now, Harry, when a lady addresses you! You must have made your selections for to-day! . . . Hulloa, Maureen, my wee bit of sticky sugar-stuff, how are you?"

"I want to go and buy another choc-ice," said Maureen. "Where's Uncle Jack? . . ."

"And did you ackshually shoot the rapids, Archie?" Bobo was meanwhile asking the Duke.

"Ha-bitually, Miss Baggaley," replied the Duke.

"And you weren't scared stiff?"

"No-o," answered the Duke reflectively. "Not at Niagara, don't you know? At . . . the other place . . . what do they call it?"

"The White City," suggested Peter, who had escaped from Zoe and come up behind him.

"Nark it, mate, nark it!" whispered the Duke, taking advantage of Bobo's attention being enviously distracted by the sight of a woman in a real mink coat. "I'm not playin' this spiel 'cos I want to, yer know!" Then aloud to Bobo, "Yes, the White City!" he said. "Not, of course, the dreadful place in Shepherd's Bush; I mean the one in the desert, where the Blue Rapids are, hundreds of feet high, don't you know? . . . Higher than that, much!" and he incautiously indicated the summit of the Giant Plunger, the loftiest of all the dippers, steeple-chasers, and other rides on Pleasure Beach, the very emperor of switchbacks.

"And you used to shoot them, Duke?" enquired Gail admiringly.

"Ha-bitually, Miss Marian."

"Oh! then it would be child's play for you to take us all on the Giant Plunger?"

"Yes, do!" squeaked Bobo, delighted, and "I want to go on the Plunger!" whined Maureen from under Gail's arm.

"You don't know what you're asking for, Gail!" Peter warned her. "Remember what you've got before you, to-night!"

"Don't be a coward, Peter!" answered Gail. "You're not afraid to come, are you, Zoe?"

"What, me? . . . Oh, no, I've not known what fear was since I asked Bob Forshaw for a raise!"

The Duke looked anguished. "Unfortunately, Miss Baggaley, since the days I spoke of, I 'ave developed a weak 'art," he confessed.

"Aw, now, don't be awkward, Dukey!" protested Bobo, with alarming symptoms of tears. "You've just *got* to take us . . . so there," and she marched off in the direction of the Plunger.

"Get cracking, Duke!" admonished Peter, punching him in the ribs. "Weak heart never won fair lady, you know!"

"All very well for you to chirp up, cully!" replied the Duke in disgruntled tones; "but I worked one o' the bally things at Wembley, and had to clean up after they came off it! However, in for a — penny, in for a — pound, I s'pose! Thank Gawd I kin go back to my own — job after to-night, I'm told."

"Duke!" remonstrated Peter, shocked, "try to remember your station!"

"Why in 'ell should I forget it? 'S on the ticket, ain't it? . . . Oh, orl right!" He strode resignedly after Bobo, shouting, "This way, Miss! Take your tickets here, please!"

"Come along, Mamma!" called Zorilda. "We're all going for a ride!"

"Not on a donkey, I won't!" said Mamma stubbornly. "I didn't change my—"

"They won't be seen, Mamma! It's not on a donkey at all," explained Zoe, and hustled her step-parent and the silent, effaced Cousin Julie into their places in the queue for the Plunger.

"Hulloa!" Jack Kelham greeted them with his party. "Here we are again! Now for the mixed pickles!"

"I want to go on the Plunger beside Uncle Jack!" piped Maureen.

"Well, you won't," answered Nita promptly. "You'll go with Ilka in front! And you'll sit beside me this time, Mr Jack Kelham. And when I say sit, I mean *sit*!"

VI

They crowded on to the car and passed into the chill of a sloping tunnel, in which the rails, shooting up ahead of them, gleamed for a moment with sinister suggestion, then disappeared in a blackness filled with the grinding of wheels and the coughs of the apprehensive passengers.

Abruptly they emerged into blinding daylight high above the world. They could glimpse the outskirts of Blackpool for a moment

on a pale-green carpet; then their attention was frozen on to the track in front, going up and up and curling over at a point where it seemed to touch the clouds. The skeleton structure on which they were travelling was invisible beneath them, and Peter had a pricking in the soles of his feet at this sensation of being suspended in the midst of the firmament. The summit grew steadily nearer and nearer, while the car woke creaks from the wooden framework, and to Peter's nervous fancy shook alarmingly from side to side. "This is *it!*" he announced grimly, his eyes fixed on zero-point, now only a few yards ahead. Gail turned to laugh at him, her hair lifting and spreading under her hat in the stiff breeze that rushed to meet them. "Courage, Peter!" she mocked . . . then her face changed.

The car as it glided over the top seemed to give a buck, while the gulf spread out below it, dotted with tiny booths, tents, the criss-cross of fences, and the black knots of the pleasure-hunters. Then, leaping in an instant into top speed, it hurled itself down the almost perpendicular incline, giving its passengers the feeling that their insides had been torn out and impaled upon the pinnacle they had left. To this was added, for Peter, the anguish of Gail's long, tinted nails digging into his flesh. "Oh, God!" she prayed, as the pace slowed for the next climb, "take me out of this! Please, dear little Guardian Angel, take me off it *now!*" "Too late!" Peter told her, gritting his teeth, "you *would* come!"

Jack Kelham's long face turned to grin at them from the seat in front—it seemed a paler egg than usual under the disordered wisps of straw-coloured hair. Peter passed his arm round Gail's waist to hearten her as the car went slower and slower up the spider track into mid-space again. Slower and slower as they neared a peak higher than any they had scaled before . . . and with a clanking and grinding that grew more intermittent. No one dared utter the ridiculous thought that was in every mind, "Will it slide backwards?"

It was a relief when, as it were with an expiring effort, it hoisted itself over the top, and then . . .

This time the white buildings of Pleasure Beach, the lines of houses on the sea-front, the Cambridge-blue ribbon of the sea, whirled about them, as, with the same disruption of their internal economy, they shot into the new abysm. At that point an observant spectator below might have remarked a minute brown speck falling to earth between the struts of the framework. It was Maureen's fourth choc-ice; she having no further use for it. Even in his agony Peter thought that if Gail could learn to register terror in the theatre as she was doing now, they would pass her on to tragedy. . . . Not that he wanted much more of this voyage himself, even with his arm round her! . . .

Clank! clank! . . . they were once again mounting with declining speed to a curved summit. Suddenly Gail shrieked, "Peter! It's going over the edge!" and really that did seem the destination of the car,

as, with the heads of the front-row passengers fixed in silent terror, it pointed its prow against emptiness, while the downward track sheered away, it appeared, at right angles to their course. . . . And it was at this moment that Peter (unless he were the victim of an hallucination) beheld Harry Randolph placidly putting pencil-marks in the side of his racing special!

Then, with a couple of jolts that nearly did overcome Peter's power of stomachic resistance, the demon that was carrying them took the corner and dashed downhill with an impetus that was no longer even frightening . . . that had become a mere misery of giddiness. Lastly, jerking them contemptuously but savagely over the minor undulations of the finish, it deposited them at the landing-stage to rise on tottering feet and make their way out on to ground that was not for some minutes *terra firma*. Anything more inadequate to the occasion than the phlegmatic face of the brakesman at the foot of the run Peter thought he had never seen.

"What did you let me do it for? You knew I had to play to-night!" croaked Gail to Peter, who only smiled wanly and tried to stiffen his knees. While Gail was lifting her hat off her ear he cast furtive looks at the others to see how they had taken the experience. The foreign girls were laughing gaily—after all, if they had known what nerves meant, they would never have graduated as acrobatic dancers! Zoe, whom he had noticed during the transit burying her head in Mamma's rocky bosom, was violently powdering herself, her face puckered into a thousand flickering wrinkles. "Gudesakes!" she groaned, poking her coppery ringlets back under her turban, "I havena felt so weak since my honeymoon night with King Kong!" Behind her spectacles Cousin Julie seemed unmoved; the Duke's mouth was folded at the corners into deep gashes, and his cheeks were hollow; while Bobo had departed from the general colour scheme by going bright purple.

"I want to go——" said Maureen, raising a greenish countenance to Nita. "I want to go——"

"You'll go on nothing else to-day!" declared Nita, who was passably blanched herself. "Haven't you had enough?"

"I want to go home!" wailed Maureen.

"What's this?" exclaimed Jack, coming up brimming with exhilaration. "Lovely ride, wasn't it, Maureen?" In an excess of avuncular jollity he picked up the little girl in his arms and swung her in the air.

That was the big mistake of the afternoon.

VII

Soon afterwards Gail and Peter separated from the rest, most of whom had to be getting to their theatres for the first houses. Jack was optimistic about getting Peter a shake-down in his digs for the night,

if necessary, so Peter decided not to worry further about that matter till the morrow. "Bye-bye, Gail!" waved Bobo. "See you at the theatre! What a night for us two! Dukey, where's your car? . . . You told me the chauffeur would meet us here!"

"Must be still under repair, I'm afraid, Miss Baggaley. D'you mind slumming it in a taxi?"

When they had gone Peter proposed to take Gail for some tea, and, after hesitating before a crowded café, which displayed a notice "American Bar—Stewed Tripe," they went outside the amusement-ground and entered a neighbouring hotel on the front, built in pleasing imitation of a Renaissance French château. . . .

"Why is there no Press photographer here to take our leading lady eating fried plaice?" Peter teased her.

"She mustn't eat any more of it!" Gale pushed the plate away. "Give me a cigarette!"

"Do you think you ought to smoke?"

"Give me a cigarette!"

"One of the 'gimme! gimme!' girls!" he sighed resignedly, holding out his case.

She lighted a cigarette, drew a whiff or two, then crushed it out on to a brass ash-tray enamelled with a representation of the Tower. "What's the time?" she said in a changed voice.

"Just after six!" answered Peter with a sudden thickening in his throat.

"Time to be off!" said Gail calmly. "I'll take a taxi outside and run out to the flat for one or two things first. Then I'll go on down to the theatre. . . . No, don't come with me! . . . I'd rather go alone. Look in at my dressing-room about a quarter-past seven and wish me luck, dear!"

Peter watched her white hat disappear along the front as she drove off; then he lit a cigarette and strolled along towards Central Pier, trying to master his own nerves. He had nowhere to go now until about seven, and presently paid the pier-toll and walked about half the length of the planking, turning then to look at the view of Blackpool bathed in a radiant sunset.

The light haze of the earlier afternoon had been burnt up by the western glow, which now beat strongly upon the sea-wall with its crawling iron stairs, deepening the sky to cloudlessness, moulding the brown, grey, and scarlet terraces with their peaked gables and squat chimney-pots, illuminating as by a spotlight the bold advertisement of Swan Vestas on a wall above the yellow Foxhall Inn. Each landmark in the long panorama was defined like a sculptured model—the black gasometers and red church steeples, looking south, the single, sooty factory chimney skewering the centre of the picture, the crimson cobweb of the Tower against the gleaming blue, the classical carved pediments of the Palace at its foot, the flamboyant Jacobean of the Town

Hall spire, the white chalk-stick of the War Memorial pointing to the green summit of the Northern cliffs crowned by their mock-mediæval castle.

Peter's heart beat as he thought of this great town waiting to hear his music, to appreciate the voice and the grace of Gail Darien—his discovery! That he supposed all Blackpool to have no other thought must be forgiven him; such is the sacred egoism of the artist!

Gail Darien! His heart swelled now as though it would burst; he held to the rail of the pier while the tears dimmed his vision; music he would never set on paper bore his reveries aloft; he heard feet drumming on the planks of the pier as they passed him, but took in nothing any longer of his surroundings. . . .

When he came to himself, he was moving slowly north along the esplanade. Damp patches and pools upon the sand glimmered pink in the westering sun. The pony-driven carts with their black ensign OYSTERS were doing a brisk trade, and the faces of passers-by were endangered every minute by the tremendous swipes of small boys hitting their not-too-well-pleased fathers for six in family cricket. The mists were drawing again over the soft golden glimmer of the sea, and the shouts of cockle and sweet-stuff sellers took on a plaintive note. Drove of donkeys were giving the last rides of the day, and troops of small girls with their hair streaming behind them rocked by in fleeting friezes on the ancient Victorian saddles.

Soon the declining sun itself began to dissolve into a mere of sad colours; the black figures dotting the limitless shore to disperse tea-wards; the mists gradually drowned the outlines of the piers. Only two children defiantly completing the moat of a sand-castle lingered in sight with ears deaf to distant summonses. Northwards the sky was still and piled with purple masses upon which faint tracings of mountains were visible. . . . Or were they, too, but cloud mirages?

CHAPTER FOUR

I

THE Palatine Gardens Theatre at Blackpool we might figure as being neither so intimate as the Grand, with its coquettish Louis Quinze vestibule and its general air of a Marquise's boudoir, nor so majestic as the New Opera House, whose unadorned copper-coloured arch seems the rebuke of the austere architecture of the 1930's to the glittering baroque of Blackpool's other places of entertainment. But you can think of it as large enough and impressive enough, with its panelling of cherry mahogany, its russet upholstery, and the broad crimson band, the tint of autumnal creeper, across the foot of its tableaux curtains. A strip of the same colour across the bills on the front of the house gave notice this day that the opening performance of *Blackpool Breezes* would begin at 7.30.

Through the afternoon the stage-staff and electricians had been busy on their last-minute tasks, re-hanging cloths and borders and re-doing the coloured mediums of the lamps; and the telephones of the stage-manager's room had been shrilling with enquiries about missing articles of costume. In its silent, expectant gloom, the front of the house shone with the last efforts of the cleaners; Monty Du Parc himself had made certain that there was an adequate supply of free drinks for the local and visiting notabilities; the telegrams of good luck were piling up in the hall-keeper's rack, and since five o'clock bouquets had been arriving to embower his office.

Soon after six the pulse of things began to quicken. The stage-door was darkened every minute by the arrival of members of the company, some of whom had come in their cars, and others walked past the enormous queues for the cheap seats, wondering when the time would come for *their* names to be whispered by crowds as they went by. The chorus, male and female, "signed themselves in" on entry; the rest paused only to pick up their mail and dressing-room keys. The anxious ones went straight to their rooms to begin their make-up and dressing; others, to cheat their nerves, wandered from room to room wishing one another good luck. The front of the house staff had changed into their uniforms, and were assembling in the foyer of the stalls and at the back of the circle for inspection by the resident manager, before picking up their sheafs of artistically decorated programmes and their trays of chocolates.

The clock in the hall-keeper's office stood now at five minutes to seven, and the chant of the Muezzin of the theatre world, the call-boy, "Half an hour, please!" rang along the back-stage passages, awaking concealed tremors and heart-thumps in the various dressing-

rooms, where also signs of faintness were combated with the usual remedies. The principals had been arriving for some time past—Harry Vernon, the tenor, handsome and stolid, a slightly too magnificent figure of a man; Patricia Worthington, dark-haired and slanting of eyebrow, a mistress of crisp comedy repartee; Jacqueline Rogers, the young principal dancer, slipping by with her hair still in grips and a shining pair of new ballet sandals under her arm; Whirter and Carr, the comics, set and silent as if on their way to the operating table; Bobo Baggaley (to please the wench by setting her in this august company) as free from nerves as a rhinoceros, and loudly enquiring of the hall-keeper for flowers—"They'll have the Duke of Kyleakin's card on them, Tommy!" Her arrival could be heard in every dressing-room, and her fellow-artists, shuddering, could only be thankful that she refrained from whistling in the passages—everybody knows what luck the show could have expected then!

As the song of the call-boy died away in the distance, Reggie the stage-manager appeared in the door of the hall-keeper's office. "Principals all in, Tommy?" he enquired, poised for flight to his next care. "Except Miss Darien," answered the man.

"What did you say?"

"Miss Darien; she 'asn't come in yet, Mr Bligh."

Reggie, with a pious exclamation, made one bound to Mr Pallent, who was on the stage looking over the setting of the first scene, and, winged by his superior's prayers, another to the telephone in his room. As he snatched up the receiver he heard through the adjoining pass-door the blast of the fireman's whistle in the front of the house opening the theatre for the audience to enter.

II .

"Said she was ill and couldn't come?" exclaimed Monty Du Parc, plucking off his horn-rimmed glasses and staring. In his usual exaggerated elegance of evening dress he had been dictating letters to a secretary in the stage-director's room close to the prompt corner.

"And then," panted Reggie, "she rang off and I couldn't get her again! Must have taken the receiver off!"

"Evie knows nothing about it; Gail told her she'd be in early," said Pallent. Evie was Gail's dresser.

"It's nerves," said Monty. "My God!"

For a moment the three men stood looking at each other in dismay, while upon Monty there fell the full realization of what it meant that he was in sole charge at the moment, Inman being as usual absent, and neither Forshaw nor Zharkov having yet arrived for a look round before going in front to welcome their guests.

Only for a second did he internally stagger; then, "Get Madge

dressed!" he rapped to Reggie, who fled without a word in search of the understudy.

"Madge hasn't had one rehearsal," muttered Pallent.

"That's your headache!" retorted Monty. "You ring Mr Forshaw at the Metropole and tell him what's happened! I'm running out to Gail's flat in my car!"

Pallent glanced at his wrist-watch. "There's about twenty-five minutes till we ring up," he said, "and the first two scenes till she comes on play fifteen. . . . Am I to hold the curtain?"

"I'll ring you!" answered Monty, rushing out of the room.

Pallent shook his head, and returned to the stage, where Reggie met him.

"I've told Madge. She's having kittens," he said consolingly.

The uninterested face of the clock in the hall-keeper's office read six minutes past seven as Monty ran past it. . . . He felt he had been an hour manœuvring his little two-seater out of the line of cars parked opposite the stage-door, when at last he swung into Church Street. He prayed he would encounter no speed-cops as, avoiding the crowded front, he threaded his way, like an electric needle, through the back-street traffic, into Gynn Square. There he swerved out on to the North Cliff drive, less crammed at this hour than the Central front. The line of tall lamps seemed to leap at him as he jammed the accelerator down; and to his agitated consciousness it seemed hardly a minute before he was out of the car in Lowther Avenue and pressing the bell of Gail's flat upon the first floor.

He kept his thumb upon the button, sending an angry, continuous buzz, that could be heard through the coloured glass panels of the door, along the flat. No woman in a state of nerves, he calculated, would sit and let that noise go on indefinitely. But at the end of a couple of minutes, since there was no sign from within, he began to ask himself, "Where do I go from here? Break down the door?" His forehead ran, as he took his thumb for a second from the bell, and in his singing ears he seemed to hear distinctly the voice of the call-boy at the theatre, crying, "Quarter of an hour!" He rammed the bell-push home again, and in a minute saw a light come on in the hall, flicker as though the hand on the switch had been unsteady, and then shine out again. The door opened a few inches, and Monty, with a firm hand, pressed it back and squeezed himself inside.

"Gail!" he cried to the cowering figure in the hall. "What the hell game are you playing at?"

"I can't come to the theatre!" she gasped, backing, pale and wild-eyed, against the hat-stand. "Monty, I can't *do* it!"

He controlled himself with an effort that seemed to tense all his muscles. "Why, what's wrong, dear?" he asked in a reassuring voice, drawing her to him by her trembling arm. "You're not ill, surely? Relax now and tell me what's the matter." He led her into the sitting-

room; but, as he did so, he unhooked her overcoat and scarf, which he had noted hanging on the hat-stand, and brought them in with him.

"I can't go on!" she said in a strangled voice, as he pushed her gently into an arm-chair. "My voice has gone . . . I couldn't sing a note! . . . Oh! do believe me! . . . I was trying to get a doctor when you came!"

Monty glanced at the telephone on a side-table: the receiver had been removed. "I see," he said, replacing it. "Now, listen to me, dear! I know exactly what's wrong with you . . . first-night nerves. We've all had 'em, you know!"

"You don't understand, Monty! . . . I *can't* go on! . . . All those people staring at me!"

Monty gritted his teeth, but his voice continued like honey. "The moment you smell the theatre this will all go like a dream . . . and you'll be ashamed of yourself! Now, Gail, snap out of it! We haven't a split second to let the grass grow! Into this coat while I ring the theatre to say you're coming!"

"But, Monty, you're mad! . . . You can't make me do this! . . . Not after what's happened to me . . . not after *this*!"

She opened her hand and showed a letter she had been crushing in her fist.

"May I?" Monty snatched it from her without waiting for leave and began to read it.

"From Derek!" he muttered. . . . "What the hell's this? . . . Gone off with Peter Warner's sister! . . . Well, I'm damned! . . . Started on a tour of Irish variety with her in a musical quartet!" He dashed the letter down upon the table. "He had to choose this minute for it, had he!"

Gail had fallen back into the chair. Monty looked at her. In the rays from the tawdry grey-and-white bowl-light hanging from the ceiling the crumpled girl lay white-faced against the cushion with her long hair scattered over it. Fizz's leading lady . . . and it was a matter of minutes now before the curtain must rise! . . . No, but he would not accept defeat!

He dropped on one knee beside her chair. "Gail!" he said, "I'm sorry . . . I can never tell you how much! . . . It's a frightful knock and Derek's a—never mind what! . . . But it's *happened*; you can't undo it, and now—you've got to be brave! For your own sake! At this moment," he looked at his watch, "yes, it's even now not too late; they'll hold the curtain, and we'll get there in ten minutes—at this moment you're still a star about to blaze on your public. Give way now . . . and to-morrow you're a bit of wreckage drifting down Shaftesbury Avenue. Every agent's door shut to you! . . . No one has any use for actresses whose private lives interfere! . . . Do you hear me, Gail?"

She was dumb, and he pitilessly pressed his advantage. "If I pick

up that phone and tell Pallent to ring up on time with the understudy, d'you realize what it means? It means 'Once there was a Gail Darien.' You'll have done for yourself, and played the filthiest possible trick on Fizz; on me, who staked my reputation you were the girl for them; on everyone who's risked their money on you. Yes, by God, and Peter Warner . . . you still care for *him*, don't you? . . . you drag him down with you!"

"Peter!" cried Gail savagely. "He was in it! . . . He helped them! . . . He lied to me!"

"Damn the whole gang of 'em!" thought Monty furiously. Aloud he said, "Then you're out with Peter too. . . so what? Must that make you flop like a school-girl? Have you no pride, Gail Darien? Hit him back where it hurts! But don't upset *our* whole apple-cart because you haven't the guts to fight your own emotions!"

Gail gave a sob. "Madge can't s-sing the part!" she said.

"That means you won't let us down? . . . Good girl! I knew you wouldn't! . . ." He leapt to the telephone and demanded the number of the theatre. "Understudies have seized their chance, you know, and the principals have been sorry!" he flung sidelong at Gail—and never understood the real reason why she turned red. "Palatine Gardens?" he asked. "Mr Pallent, *quick!*" Another glance at Gail showed her fumblingly knotting the scarf over her head, and dabbing powder on her tear-stained cheeks. "Pallent? . . . Hold it till I bring her! We'll make it in ten minutes. . . . What? . . . Well, if Mr Forshaw's there, tell him what I say! He couldn't advise anything different!"

He dropped the receiver with a ting, and throwing Gail's coat over her shoulders thrust her before him out of the flat. "She won't go back now!" he thought as he slammed the front door with relief behind him. But she began to sob with such violence descending the stairs that he asked himself if he were not crazy to try to force a woman in this state to act. . . . Yet countless stage triumphs had been won on tortured nerves! . . . If he could only get her into the theatre, she might become an actress again!

"You'd better shut your eyes if you have any dirt-track nerves!" he told her as he bundled her into the seat beside the driver's. Then, springing in, he shot away down Holmfild Road, and riskily out, without slowing, on to the major thoroughfare of Norbreck Hill. There was a furious blast from a car that braked only just in time to avoid collision. "Sorry, cock!" muttered Monty. "I'd feel like you in your place . . . but there's twenty thousand pounds or so on this race . . . which you don't know!"

Gynn Square seemed empty, and the needle flickered to fifty as he rushed into Dickson Road, also clearer than when he had come.

Suddenly Gail spoke in a voice like cracking glass. "If you make me go on I shall break down before everybody!"

"Not you!" he answered, and, trying to keep one half of his mind on the road, he went on, "Once you see the spots focus on you and hear the applause as you step on, you'll be an actress again and . . . *Damn!*"

The horns of two cars screeched; and a tram made an agitation like a fire-bell. It was a grand mix-up, in Talbot Square opposite the Town Hall. If, after all, there was not even a mudguard scrape, that was because Monty Du Parc *was* a driver.

But the narrow shave seemed to have touched his nerve a little—or was it the Town Hall clock just clearing the half-hour?—for, diving into the narrow roads by the market, he got into a one-way street at the wrong entry, and a one-way street with a spiked helmet at the far end! He jerked backward cursing, but lost nearly five minutes before he could get on the right route again. After that he went straight over Church Street against the traffic signals, only to find himself hopelessly blocked at last by a press of cars and taxis leaving last-minute arrivals at the Palatine Gardens and the other neighbouring theatres. "This has done us!" he gasped, falling back in his seat, and then he had a surprise.

"Don't worry, Monty!" answered Gail in an almost normal voice. "I'll get out and run for it!" and before he could speak she had slipped from her seat, and was darting through the throng on the pavement towards the stage-door of the Palatine Gardens like a sea-gull on a low wing against a storm. "By God!" he thought, "that girl *has* guts, after all!"

III

On the pavement outside the stage-door Peter Warner was pacing up and down in agony. He had arrived some quarter of an hour before, to be told the news; and since there was nowhere he could go to look for Gail, there was nothing for him to do but wait, full of terrifying apprehensions. He turned at the corner of the beat he was treading . . . and saw her running up the street towards him! "Gail!" he cried, dashing to meet her. "What's happened? . . . My God, what's the matter?" He put his arm out to support her, aghast at her appearance. "Let me pass!" she answered with an icy look that made the whole street reel like a nightmare before his eyes, and disappeared through the stage-door, leaving him planted there with his jaw dropped. He was roused by the squeal of car-brakes, and saw Monty leaping out of his seat and rushing across the pavement. He caught at his arm. "Monty!" he cried. "For God's sake what's up? Tell me—"

"Not now, you idiot!" snapped Monty, freeing himself, and hastening with his long strides into the theatre.

As he disappeared through the swing-doors a police side-car pulled

up behind his two-seater, and its occupant jumped out. "Are you the driver of this car?" he asked Peter, scowling. "Where's he gone then?" . . .

The strains of the overture met Gail's ears as she ran down the passage towards her dressing-room, dimly aware of the anxious faces of Forshaw and Zharkov as she passed, and forcing her way through a crowd of gaily-dressed chorus girls, ready to go on. In her room Evie was just administering a whisky to Madge, an insipid blonde with a thin figure that parodied Gail's, who stood before the glass anxiously studying herself in the costume for her first entrance; while the wardrobe mistress, kneeling beside her, was rapidly sewing at the hem of her skirt, and Rita Norwood, the other walking understudy of the company (for Patricia Worthington), was fussing round with good intentions.

All looked at Gail as at a ghost, while without a word she tore at the fasteners of her dress. Evie fell upon Madge to unhook her, and then Rita snatched the whisky from her hand to offer it to Gail instead, if needed. . . .

Monty, as he came striding into the hall close on Gail's heels, was at once beset by Forshaw and Zharkov, demanding explanations.

"It's a long story," he said, "but it's O.K., now. She'll be ready!"

"Happen!" said Forshaw grimly. "She struck me as daft-lookin'!" Monty lowered his voice to tell briefly why, and Forshaw whistled. "Hughie!" he turned to the young gentleman of the sports jacket who was hovering by, "run an' knock on door, and ask how they're gettin' on wi' t'dressing!"

"Are her injuries serious?" enquired Hughie, open-mouthed.

"Thine will be, numbyed! Run!" Forshaw turned to pace up and down the side of the stage, with Zharkov glooming at his side.

Monty was about to follow Hughie towards Gail's room when someone pulled at his sleeve. It was Peter Warner.

"Look here, Monty!" he said. "Will you have the goodness to tell me what it's all about? What in hell's the matter with Gail?"

"Don't make a scene here, Peter! Come inside!" Monty pushed him into Pallent's office.

"Well, what is it?" cried Peter. "For God's sake——"

Monty gave him a slanting glance through his horn-rims. "Mean to say you don't know?"

"Don't know *what*, Monty? Is everyone crazy?"

"You don't know your sister Beryl has gone off with Gail's husband——"

"It's a lie!"

"Is it? . . . I've seen the letter Gail had from him. . . . This afternoon, I suppose. She was all right at 'notes' this morning."

"She was all right when she left me about six. Strung up, of course, but happy—confident!"

"H'm. Mr Derek seems a bit of a sadist. To choose this of all moments!"

"I can't believe it!"

"You surprise me, Peter. Gail thinks you were in it, that you wanted to get Derek away from her. Swears you played some trick on her. . . . Are you feeling queer?"

"No," said Peter hoarsely. "But I must see her at once . . . I must explain . . . I can!"

Monty seized his wrist. "None of that, Peter! Nobody speaks to her now! Good God, man, don't you realize it's touch and go whether she pulls through to-night or collapses? Want to make certain she flops, do you?"

"Sorry, Monty!" said Peter in a dull voice. "You're right: she mustn't see me now. I—I'll go round in front, I think."

"There's a police officer waiting to see you, Mr Du Parc," said the hall-keeper, putting his face round the door with a shocked expression.

While the understudy, sobbing with subdued hysteria, surrendered her costume piece by piece, Gail stripped off the last of her street clothes and stood for a second, a slim nymph, before snatching brassière and knickers from her dresser, and in a single movement sliding into them and into her place before the mirror, where with fleeting fingers she put shadow on her eyes, rouge on her cheeks, and mascara and hot black on her lashes—no time now for a proper make-up! Snatching up a hand-mirror, she swung round and stretched out a leg to Evie, who held her stockings ready to slip on, while she carmired her lips.

At that moment Hughie's knock fell on the door. "Miss Darien dressed yet?" he piped outside.

"Just ready!" shouted the wardrobe mistress, who had been ripping out the stitches she had put in the skirt for Madge, and now advanced holding it ready for Gail.

There was a thud of running feet in the passage. "Miss Darien!" cried the call-boy.

Gail thrust her feet into her shoes and sprang up to put on a last dab of powder before stepping into the dress. There was another violent thump on the door. "Miss Darien, you'll be off!" roared Reggie's voice.

Gail flung the door open, and followed by Evie desperately zipping the side of her skirt together, passed through the knot of agitated officials hanging round her door, and walked on to the stage at her cue, looking incredibly calm and collected. Pallent, impassive, pressed the buzzer for the lights. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

I

As Peter went through the pass-door the buzz of the audience seemed to strike him in the face. This was the monster they had to face up to—and with Gail in the state he had last seen her! The overture had just ended, and there was an awkward pause, while Les Linacre stood at the conductor's desk watching for the red light that would signal the first scene. With the cessation of the music the gusty hum of the house seemed to rise louder, and there was already a questioning, an excited note in it. Peter, wishing he could make himself invisible, slipped upstairs behind the boxes and round to the back of the circle, where there was, he knew, a sofa in a recess that would give him a refuge.

As he fell upon the comfortable cushions of the settee, he felt physically dizzy. He could not imagine what was coming next . . . what would be the fate of the show . . . of his music. But that seemed to matter less at this moment than Gail's personal tragedy. How Derek had fooled the two of them! . . . the tale of his innocent friendship with Beryl! . . . the story of Stulitzer's telegram calling him to London to see about a part there! . . . How vilely Beryl too had behaved! Peter did not believe he could ever feel a spark of affection for her again! It was for him the uprooting of the greater part of his past life. . . .

There was a sudden "A-a-a-h!" from the audience, and the auditorium lights dipped. The band crashed into the brisk introduction to the first scene of the *revue*, "Blackpool Central Station," and shrill chorus voices told that the curtain had risen. At least there had been no announcement of an understudy!

With his head in his hands in the darkness, Peter did not even rise to watch the opening—the porters wheeling luggage, the visitors to Blackpool entering through the gates at the back, Bobo Baggaley's short burst of tap-dancing as a newspaper boy. . . . He was seeing only Gail's stony face when she went past him at the stage-door. Of course, she believed he had tricked her . . . what else could she do? He had lied, so foolishly, about that telegram, and how should he ever persuade her that his motive had been good? . . . Indeed, he might have brought about the catastrophe by his intervention, since it had served Derek's main purpose of lulling Gail's suspicions to rest. . . . And only three hours since Peter had been with her on Pleasure Beach, laughing, exchanging confidences, no cloud between them . . . before them only the great expectation of to-night, nerve-racking, but glittering with hope! Now! . . .

He groaned, and his groan mingled with the rasping voices of Whirter and Carr, who had arrived as "t'lads from Oldham," greedy for the delights of Blackpool, and making hair-raising enquiries from a most incredible landlady, who proffered her card, about the limits to which she was ready to go to accommodate them. . . .

Would the scene never end? Peter writhed on his seat awaiting the moment of Gail's first appearance. . . . He had to endure a crisp dialogue between the elegant compère, Parry Marlborough, and Patricia Worthington, as a lady in a box, on the topic of indiscreet snoopers. . . . At last their voices stopped, and the tabs parted to display a curtain of black velvet with an immense gilt-edged keyhole in the centre, flanked by four smaller ones each side. Peter dared not look up as slowly the flap of the middle keyhole swung aside; but he heard the little gasp of pleasure the audience gave as Gail Darien was disclosed within, holding two completely white Borzoi dogs on the leash in her slender, black-gloved hands. (It will be realized that Mr Inman had at last won his battle with the Chairman over those "damned dogs.")

Peter had had a sickening turn when he heard that murmur. . . . Did it mean that something had gone wrong? . . . Had Gail fainted, perhaps? . . . Or had an understudy been revealed, and detected? The next moment he heard Gail's voice beginning the number "Luxury Lady"—not one of Peter's, but a sophisticated song from New York. It did not suit her, in Peter's opinion, except that the purity of her diction and her innocent look gave an added piquancy to the risky rhymes.

On legs that felt like cotton-wool he rose and advanced to the barrier at the back of the circle. A knife seemed to go through him as he gazed at the picture she made in her white duvateen man-tailored suit, with its pencil skirt split to well above the knee, so as to show her lovely legs in sheer silk and high-heeled buckskin shoes. Her blonde hair was taken neatly away from her face, up and under a wide-brimmed hat, with black net veiling that passed beneath her chin. . . . Peter understood now the meaning of that sigh when she had appeared; it seemed to lift her yet farther out of his reach on a pedestal of popular favouritism!

The first real applause of the evening came blended with laughter at the end of her song, as the rest of the keyholes opened to show eight of Fizz's finest show-girls in national dresses—Germany with a dachshund, Russia with a wolf-hound, France with a poodle, China with a pekinese, Iceland with a huskie, Belgium with a griffin, the Highlands with a Scottie, and England with a bull-dog.

Peter staggered away from the excitement and the barking into the circle bar and demanded a double whisky.

"Ee! Mr Warner," said the homely barmaid, who knew him, "you do look queer! Must be a strain an' all for you, these first nights!"

She poured out his whisky, which he seized and gulped down, immediately demanding another.

Suddenly a voice spoke in his ear. It was Rita Norwood, the unemployed understudy, who had, like him, been watching from the circle how Gail fared. "She's going over marvellously, isn't she?" she said. "Everything's going marvellously! It'll be *your* song in a few minutes now, Mr Warner! . . . You must be feeling fine!"

"Fine!" said Peter thickly. "Oh yes, Rita, swell! . . . Here, have this whisky instead of me, will you? I can't take it. . . . My God, you're right! . . . How bloody fine I feel!" He let the glass doors of the bar swing with a thud behind him as he plunged back into the darkness of the circle, leaving the two women staring at each other.

"Take another!" said Monty to Gail, and her hunted look turned mechanically to a smile as she wheeled round and again appeared before the tabs. She had a peculiarly graceful bow, an inclination of her head accompanied by a sweeping movement of her hand and a responsive swaying of her lithe body. Monty watched appreciatively, smoothing his dabs of moustache. "They keep calling her back just to see her do that!" he murmured to Pallent, who stood beside him in the corner. "Clever!"

"Think she knows she does it?" asked Pallent briefly, and signalled the switch-board.

Gail came off with staring eyes, and Monty closed in upon her. "Swell!" he said. "You were swell! . . . You've made the grade all right, Gail!"

"Peter!" answered Gail, looking round distractedly. "Where's Peter Warner? . . . I must see him . . . at once!"

"O.K.!" said Monty. "I'll send for him. But you've no time now!" And he adroitly piloted her into the change-room made of bits of scenery cleated together, which stood close to the wings for rapid transformations. Here Evie waited for her with her next dress.

"Quickly, dear!" she said. "Sit down and let me get that hat off!"

"I can't do any more . . . I c-can't go on again!" pleaded Gail.

"Come, dear!" Evie coaxed her, letting down her piled locks for a fresh hair-do with dexterous fingers. "Don't talk nonsense, if you'll forgive me saying so! You were just wonderful. Wasn't she, Mr Du Parc?"

"That's what I tell her!" answered Monty through the canvas. "A smash-hit the moment they set eyes on her! She's only got to follow it up now!"

"Don't leave me, then, Monty!" implored Gail from within.

"Of course not!" he reassured her. "I'm standing by all this evening, and I won't let you put a foot wrong . . . eh, Evie?"

"That's right, Mr Du Parc! . . . That's your hair, dearie, and now the dress!"

"Would you like a whisky, Gail?" came Rita's voice; "I've brought you one from the bar. . . . Mr Warner's behaving ever so queerly out in front!"

"Shut up!" said Monty savagely. "Have the whisky yourself, Rita! She'd better not, just now!"

"Well, if you insist——"

"Quickly, Gail!" called Monty. "The Hotel scene's nearly over. You'll be called in a second!"

Harry Vernon, her partner, appeared, ready for his cue. "What's the matter with Gail?" he asked of Monty in a low voice. "Hope she won't queer this duet for me!"

"She'll be all right, Harry! Gail, you're called!"

"Here's your cape!" said Evie. "On you go!"

"Keep close to the side!" said Gail, clutching Monty's arm, as she came out of the change-room. "I must be able to see you!"

"I shall be there!" He patted her hand. "Now . . . you're on!"

As the comics poured off the stage on the opposite side at the end of their scene, Pallent pressed the button marked "Electrics," and the switch-board above him became alive with activity. Men turned the wheels of the dimmers, taking all the lights on the stage down to low, while a deep blue coloured the closed tableau curtains. Behind them stage-hands hurried the last pieces of scenery into position. In the orchestra, at a touch of the button, "Musical Director," the boogie-woogie music of the comedy sketch had snapped off, and with a soft arpeggio from the harp the strings had preluded.

Then Pallent in his corner spoke again. "Open!" he said, at the same time pressing the button "Front Limes"; and as the Spots from the gallery came on, "Stand by to come up to amber!" he added into the mike for the benefit of the switch-board men, and "Stand by, the rain!" to Reggie.

The tableau curtains had rustled back at the turning of a winch by a stage-hand at his side, and had revealed a front-cloth of a park by night, with a rustic seat in the centre beneath the overhanging branches of a tree. "Go!" said Pallent to Reggie, and up in the flies in answer to the assistant's signal a man turned the wheel controlling the water. From a long lead pipe high above the proscenium, wedged in between cloths, borders, and battens, the "rain" streamed through scores of tiny holes on to a waterproof stage-cloth, which carried it off along a runnel in front of the footlights. Through this shimmering curtain in a steel-blue focus a man and a girl, both swathed in mackintoshes and carrying umbrellas, walked on to the stage and took refuge on the seat beneath the tree. The girl shivered, and the man put his arm comfortingly round her. Then on a chord from the drummer on a dulcitone, she began to sing. . . .

Some of Peter Warner's admirers maintain that this song, "The Park Nobody Knows," is the best he ever wrote. Its tune has the simplicity of all the great popular songs, but he has somehow contrived to steep it in his dreams. All his tenderness and his yearning, all his shy lover's sense of the inaccessibility of the desired one, all his soul's hovering with tremulous fingers over the ideal that may wither at a touch, have conveyed themselves into this tune. Peter would be the last man to deny that he was lucky to have had such a sensitive master of instrumental colouring as Les Linacre to orchestrate it for him; but as he listened to-night, clinging to the barrier of the circle with the tears unashamedly running down his face, he attributed the success of it to Gail's voice, so well supported by Harry Vernon's mellow organ. . . . When one recalls that before the duet was finished the gallery had begun to whistle the refrain with the orchestra, one has the measure of the song's immediate triumph. . . .

One step behind the cloth of the nocturnal park in its rain-drenched solitude, and how different was the spectacle! Beneath the watchful eye of the stage carpenter the stage had sunk out of sight, and where it had stood a moment before, there was now a tank of water banked with glowing artificial flowers. Behind it a fountain had begun to play, and Jacqueline Rogers, clad from head to foot in pale-blue leitardes that glittered with a thousand pink, powder-blue, and oyster-coloured sequins, had already taken her place kneeling in front of it as the Spirit of the Pool. At the same time, summoned by the call-boy, the girls were trooping down from their dressing-rooms at the top of the theatre, some clothed in tight-fitting waterproof dresses in every shade of pastel colouring, others pressing down with their hands in the narrow stairway the magnificent plumage of tropical birds in which they were decked, and wearing round their bodies the invisible harness required for a flying-ballet.

As the last notes of Gail's voice died away, the whole area behind the front-cloth went black; a sliding section of the stage in front of it, upon which the singers and their seat were placed, began to glide towards the wing opposite the Prompt Corner; and in answer to a buzz from below, the waiting fly-men took up the front-cloth itself. Then Pallent again pressed the button "Electrics," and on the Spot Bars running across the stage overhead, first one then another spot or floodlight or acting area lamp came into play, until the symphony of colour was complete to the last note, and the whole stage was a bath of multi-coloured light.

To the music of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, played by the two pianos in the orchestra pit, the solo dancer beneath the fountain, who had hitherto kept her pose, sprang to life, her sequin-covered arms and body scintillating in the myriad lights till she appeared part of the trembling spray of the fountain itself. Lissom and youthful, Jacqueline Rogers danced like a pure jet of motion swayed by the breath of the

music, tossed in the air, and drifting soundlessly again to earth. At the end of her solo eight chosen coryphées surrounded her like a wreath of floating water-lilies, while overhead the gorgeous Birds of Paradise crossed and re-crossed in dipping curves, and down the steps into the Enchanted Pool flitted in an endless chain the girls in the waterproof costumes, each holding her breath for a moment as she disappeared into the water in full view of the audience, and emerging again up unseen steps masked by the wings to resume her place in the line. . . .

As the ballet ended, amid tumultuous enthusiasm from the house, Pallent again put out a hand, the whole vision faded like a dream, and the Special Effects man with his lantern projected a rainbow on to the cyclorama cloth at the back of the stage. Then the girl singer put down her umbrella, dropped off her mackintosh, and stepped forward into a surprise pink lime, dressed in foaming off-white organdie, her hair rippling on to her shoulders. Alone she repeated in notes that soared to the dome of the auditorium the last lines of the refrain:

*"Some day I'll meet you,
Some day I'll greet you,
In the Park Nobody Knows."*

At that moment the commissionaires on the stairs from the circle and at the doors of the theatre were surprised to see a man rush past them and out into the street. It was the composer of the melody just being acclaimed in a roar that penetrated the glass doors of the auditorium and filled the corridors and foyers. With legs so shaky that it seemed a risk to run on them, not daring to draw a full breath lest he should disgrace himself by sobbing, equally unable to face congratulation or criticism, carrying with him the last glimpse he had taken of Gail as if it were a vision excluding him from paradise, he sought darkness and quiet outside. Just over his head the red guiding-lights on the summit of the Tower glowered down on him like the eyes of monster cats.

II

"Stopped the show, anyhow!" said Pallent to Monty, glancing half-anxiously at his watch as he allowed the three artists, Gail, Jacqueline, and Harry Vernon giving a hand to each, to be called out for the sixth time in front of the tabs. Then, as with relief he signalled the next scene to start, he turned to Monty with a grin. "You managed to keep that young woman up to it," he said.

Monty took off his glasses and wiped them, afterwards drawing his handkerchief lightly across his forehead. "Takes it out of a man," he said, "pumping courage into a fading star! I feel like that old guy with the doll in the ballet."

"What the hell was up with her, then?"

"Oh! she had some shocking bad private news just before going on," answered Monty. "Knocked her skew-whiff!"

"An actress has no right to *any* private life," pronounced the stage-director with a brutal look born of years of buffeting in the ill-ventilated, dusty, back-stage world. "Cut out that Fifteen Rose: what the devil are you playing at?" he snapped at the electricians through his microphone, and then, "Where'd she have been to-night without you, Monty?" he asked shrewdly.

Monty replied with a faint smile that could have meant anything.

"I must go and see how she's getting on," he said, and departed to knock at Gail's dressing-room door.

"Just a minute!" answered Evie, and after a wait, "Come in!" cried Gail in a clear and confident voice. Distinctly surprised, Monty turned the handle.

Gail was standing in front of the long mirror, studying herself in a brown walking-dress of the 'nineties with leg-of-mutton sleeves and a trailing skirt. Round her neck was a brown feather boa, and on top of her curls, now piled on her head with a ringlet falling daintily over each temple, was a tiny bonnet with a bunch of brown plumes. "I'm ready," she said calmly as Monty entered.

"That sounds more like *you*!" he answered, lifting a hand to his moustaches.

"Oh, we're quite ourself now!" agreed Evie, who was searching on the dressing-table. "Aren't we, love? . . . It was just a little bit of first-night nerves. . . . Lord, I've seen enough of 'em in my time!"

"It was being such a fool as to go careering about this afternoon," declared Gail, retying the bow of the bonnet under her long pointed chin.

"So long as it's over!" said Monty airily. "I hope you realize, dear, that you really are an immense hit?"

"They sounded as if they liked me," she agreed, drawing on slim, Victorian elbow-gloves. "Eve! Give me another pin here!" She fingered the bow of her bonnet-ribbon again, frowning.

"Righty-ho!" answered Evie, winking at Monty behind her principal's back.

Gail picked up the parasol she was to carry in the approaching Finale to the First Part, and turned from the mirror. "Where's that bad lad Peter?" she demanded of Monty.

"Had him looked for everywhere!" he lied, unblinking. "It's my belief old Peter's had it. He's probably at the Grapevine round the corner, trying to drown his anxieties. But don't get het up! We'll find him for you." (Privately he was himself curious about his friend's disappearance.)

"I should worry!" answered Gail. "If he doesn't care to come round——"

"The Finale, Miss Darien!" cried the call-boy outside.

Those who were there on that night told Peter afterwards that he had missed something which could never be repeated by running away before the Finale of Part One. It was all either his own music or old-fashioned favourites selected by him; into it he had striven to pour all the bubbling gaiety, all the kindness and homely sentiment of Blackpool as he knew it; and the scene at the fall of the curtain was a riot that could not be repeated at any subsequent performance. . . .

To slow music with a plash of sea-waves in it, the retrospect opened with a dim gauze front-cloth on which were faintly sketched the scattered marine villas of Blackpool in the eighteenth century and old Fox Hall. A sunset flush fell upon a group of fishermen with trawls on a bench outside the inn, and they (members of the famous Pedersen Male Voice Choir) rendered in dreamy harmonies Peter's "Song of the Shrimpers," with its haunting reminiscences of English folk balladry. As their rude figures faded and their deep voices died away, the gauze thinned like a mist, revealing in clearer and clearer outline a giant gilt picture frame enclosing the entire stage. On its base was inscribed "BLACKPOOL 1898," and within it was set a beach-scene of the period.

There were the boats on the shore, the nigger minstrels, the Punch and Judy, the balloon-shaped bathing belles standing timidly on the steps of their machines, the Johnnies and mashers ogling them through telescopes, the children in faunteroy suits and sailor hats, the donkeys in straw headgear, the barouche with its whiskered swell and his ear-ringed frail, the hawkers of children's air-balls and bananas. In the background rose the familiar silhouette of the Tower, and close to it—awaking joyous recognition as soon as the scene was disclosed—the Great Wheel, its vanished counter-attraction. All the personages stood still as figures in a photograph, and the entire scene, back-cloth and costumes, was in varied shades of sepia brown, completing the illusion of an old-world tin-type.

A clash on the cymbal and the assemblage came to life. The Wheel began to revolve, the minstrels rattled banjos and knuckle-bones, the donkeys passed up and down with their loads, the children swarmed with spade and bucket round their excavations, the mashers flirted, the maidens bridled, and a medley of songs from the 'nineties—"All in a Row," "Dear Little Girlie, Girlie!", "Oh! the Business!", "Lily of Laguna!"—bubbled out like champagne. And as this in its turn died away, Gail Darien, in her bonnet and feather boa, came slowly down the centre, paused, leaning on her parasol, to watch the children at their building, and started the song "Castles in the Sand," at once a memory and a sigh, a smile and a tear. Gradually, as its plaintive undertone pervaded the scene, the Wheel began to slow down again, the merry-makers to resume, as if fixed in thought, their former attitudes, and the tin-type of yesterday showed itself once more for a moment in pathetic immobility, before gauzes drowned it as before.

Swiftly the legend "BLACKPOOL 1938" appeared between a stick of rock and a tray of cocktails on the front-cloth; the band burst into jazz; and a turn of the revolving stage allowed the lights to blaze out upon the front of to-day, seen by the gleaming white cupola of the Open-air Bath. The stage was thronged with the modern counter-parts of the preceding tableau; bizarre beach costumes and a parade of shapely-limbed bathing beauties in their tight, gaily tinted swim-suits made a dazzle of daring colour. In the middle of this charivari a bell clanged, and a double-decker tram ran on to the centre of the stage and began to pick up passengers. As soon as it was crowded at every window below and above, it started on its journey, and a moving cyclorama at the back brought into view in turn the piers, the curve of the shore, the Tower, and the great new buildings round its foot. Standing in the middle doorway of the vehicle was Gail, in a close-fitting polo sweater and white corduroy slacks, and from this vantage-point she gave the public its first hearing of the tune that was to sweep the dance halls of England for the remainder of that summer, "I got that Lytham Rhythm!"

"Oh! Douglas has its Ramsay, its Laxey, and its Peel!

But give me dear old Lytham with its trotters and cow-heel,

Oh! Brighton has its Regent, its Pavilion, and its Dome!

But Lytham, dear old Lytham, is the sweetest home-from-home!"

The waving arms and streamers on the tram-car, the madly whirling groups on the beach beside it, combined in an ecstasy of rhythm. The picture was transformed for a minute into a night-scene, with the Tower ablaze, the car garlanded in electrics, and the crazy corybants in the foreground bathed in a spectrum of flitting colours spilt from revolving fans on the circle spots; then flashed out again in joyous sunshine as Gail leapt like a doe from the car and ran through the tabs to take the crashing call that fell from every quarter of the house. . . .

"'The Lytham Rhythm!' Copies of 'The Lytham Rhythm,' one and six!" chanted the usherettes, while the audience crowded out in wild excitement to the corridors and bars.

III

Shortly before the last scene of Part Two, Monty Du Parc knocked at Gail's door, and, receiving leave to enter, came in with a bottle of champagne, followed by the call-boy with a tray of glasses. "Come on, Gail!" he said. "This is just the beginning of the celebration! A drink now won't hurt you! You've nothing left to do but walk on straight in the Tower Finale! . . . My dear, what a night!" He opened the bottle and filled a glass for her.

"Thanks, Monty!" She toasted him with a slight movement, and drank. "No news of Peter?" she asked.

"Simply lost, I'm afraid, dear!" answered Monty.

Gail stopped sipping her champagne. "But how silly of him! Doesn't he want to know——?"

"Apparently not. It seems as if he just didn't care how you've done, how his own stuff has gone. I suppose he's passed out with nerves, poor old lad! So long as he doesn't go off the Tower!"

"Monty! You don't think——"

"Of course not! That was just blah! . . . Let me have your glass!"

Gail hesitated a second; then shrugged and passed it. The champagne was warming. After the efforts she had made in the Second Part not to fall behind her success in the First, she felt a deadly cold—the consequence of exhausted nerves. She needed some stimulus now to keep her dancing over the scalding gulf in which lay the memories of her life of yesterday. In the acclamations of the house this evening, she had glimpsed and grasped after the possibility of a fresh existence, another personality. To-night had been born—in what distress and agony!—a second Gail Darien, no longer the struggling singer, the unwanted wife, but a radiant new creature whom everybody wanted, everybody loved! Could she not start again in this refashioned character, confident, careless, reckless—for what really mattered now? There would be the injection of applause and homage to lull her pain; there would be all that money could buy to fill her days—to amuse, excite her, and stop her from thinking. . . . But where was Peter Warner? Didn't he realize he was missing his chance of forgiveness to-night? . . .

"I don't believe you've heard a damned word I've been saying!" complained Monty.

"Sorry, Monty! It all seems a dream! . . . Don't be cross!" There was a touch of the bacchante in her smile as she held out her glass to be refilled a second time, and there was a burning light in his eyes as he obeyed her. "I suppose one has to forgive you anything from now on!" he mocked her. "I'm pretty jubilant myself! When I remember what I felt like three hours ago, though!"

"I know, Monty!" she said apologetically. "I behaved like a bloody fool! . . . And I used to think myself a trouper! . . . But all that's over! . . . That's all past!"

There was a knock on the door for her last call.

It was only a brief appearance that Gail had to make in the concluding scene of the show, which reproduced the Moroccan splendour of the great Circus in the foot of the Tower. There were girl grooms in scarlet, a troupe of Arab acrobats, Bobo Bagdaley in clown's dress with a fantasy green wig, accompanied by the ballet, in "Crazy Katie!"; and then, as a group of papier-mâché horses rose in the

centre of the ring, with Jacqueline Rogers poised tiptoe as an equestrienne on the middle one, the whole company, principals and chorus, trooped down the steps to take their final applause.

It seemed as though the audience would never leave, and anyone who had this evening repeated the famous crack about the hardness of "playin' Blackpool!" would have been lynched. Arthur Inman had arrived according to his custom to take his call with saturnine dignity—Pallent and Reggie had decided to tell him nothing about the narrow margin by which the show had escaped disaster, for fear of delayed reaction on his nerves—and after him Zharkov had come smirking on to represent the musical side; of Peter Warner there was no trace. At last Whirter, as the senior comic, had spoken a few words of thanks, given the usual benediction (which the Theatre seems now to have taken over from the Church), and it had been possible to play "The King."

Gail, as she came off the stage, found herself rubbing shoulders with Bobo in the throng. "Congratulations, Bobo!" she said cordially; for "Crazy Katie" had been an undeniable hit. "I only wanted a chance!" declared Bobo. "Ta, old girl! . . . I thought *you* were going to pass out at the beginning!" At the next step Gail was stopped by Zharkov, who patted her shoulder. "My *Valse* for the Flower Ballet," he told her, "*that* was your success . . . more than any of your other numbers! I gave it you good, there!" (This waltz had been in the Second Part: it was Zharkov's great contribution; and Doherty had been deprived of his whisky bottle and kept up at nights for a week working on it with the help of the collected works of Johann Strauss. There had been universal approval to-night of the beautiful dresses worn by the chorus.) Gail turned from Zharkov to Monty. "But where's Mr Forshaw?" she asked. "I don't see him anywhere."

"God knows!" answered Monty. "But you'll hear from him soon enough: probably have you out of bed on the phone at three a.m. to tell you something you did wrong!"

Actually, if Monty Du Parc had been in the upper part of the theatre at that moment, he might have seen a figure, with its coat-collar pulled up to the ears and its black evening hat crushed down over its eyes, slip out of a door marked "Private" and join the crowd descending the stairs from the gallery and upper circle. It was Bob Forshaw, listening keenly to the verdict of the only critics whom he professed to regard. He knew already he had a big success, but he was eager to collect details.

It did not take him long to gather that his customers were enthusiastically agreed upon the "sweetness" of his new leading lady—and oddly enough, this caused him no special gratification. Like most theatrical magnates, he valued his own opinion more than money, and he had always considered Gail "wishy-washy." Nor did

the praises of Inman's marvellous production fall sweetly on his ears. They were another feather in the cap from which he had so long itched to pluck the plumes. No, what really brought a grin to the scarlet face under the pressed-down brim of the black hat was the laughing approval he heard expressed on all hands of Bobo Baggaley. She was a "reet lass"; she was "a bit o' stuff"; she was "ginger"! He did not trouble to ask himself whether he would have heard the same judgment from the emerging stalls: old Bob could never bring himself to take their opinions seriously. His taste was that of his cheaper patrons—one reason, maybe, why Fizz had had more than one resounding failure in the West End—and as he came out into the street and stood watching his audience disperse, he was already toying with notions to bring Bobo forward prominently in the next show.

Suddenly he was aware of a figure standing under a lamp-post on the opposite side of the street and staring at the theatre. Haggard and hatless, it yet was surely Peter Warner? . . . But by the time Bob had adjusted his thick lenses to look again, the apparition had vanished. Forshaw turned back into the theatre by the main vestibule, still thinking about Bobo Baggaley—but this time his thoughts were not purely managerial.

Meanwhile, in her dressing-room Gail stood surrounded by a sea of faces, and was just beginning to realize that three glasses of champagne after what she had been through had not been the most judicious tonic. Out of a faintly blurred background there swam towards her the portly Managing Director of the Palatine Gardens Entertainments Company, so elusive in past weeks when she had needed anything, so affectionate now, as if she had saved his whole concern from ruin! As she listened, smiling formally, his face dissolved in a cloud of cigar-smoke, out of which appeared—surprisingly—the features of Athelstan Rigglesworth. "Good girl!" he said condescendingly, and his voice seemed to come from far away. "Goo' li'l girl! I told them they'd got something here! Now you must read my play!"

"I'd be enchanted, Mr Rigglesworth," she answered.

"But where's Peter Warner?" added Rigglesworth, rolling his eyes round tragically. "Odd he shouldn't be here! Everyone talking about it in the bars! . . . The wandering minstrel, eh? . . . I'll put that in the Diary!"

He vanished in smoke, and a thin, dark woman whom Gail had never met before and was never to see again, but who was clearly one of her oldest friends, was congratulating her warmly. "It was so supremely sophisticated, my dear," she kept saying. "They'd die for you in New York. . . . Ada says just what I do! . . . There she is!" and she darted away.

Gail turned and saw Monty Du Parc smiling at her. "You look lost," he said.

"Just a trifle . . . confused!" she answered. "The whole world seems to be here!"

"So it will be, from now on! The whole world always with you! How will you like that?"

Gail looked round the crowded room, and felt a momentary panic. All these faces—of the people that "mattered"—not at the moment turned to her to give her a flattering impression, seemed hard or strained, anxious or imbecile. . . . And she would need henceforth to fight her way through them alone . . . to keep her own balance on the needle-point of success without guidance or support. For an instant she felt like crying to Monty, "Please, find Peter!" but judged it would be undignified and was silent. Meanwhile, the man at her elbow seemed to read her thoughts. "Don't be alarmed!" he said softly. "You've got the stuff in you to pull through—I think."

She smiled gratefully at him. With his fresh, reddish face, his kindly smile, and the sad look now filling his eyes as he watched her, he seemed in this hour reassuring . . . something to lean upon. She could never measure what he had done for her to-night. . . .

Then Rita Norwood flung herself upon her. "Oh, my dear, what a strain! I was watching you all the time from the circle! I hope I'll never have to go through such a night again . . . because I simply couldn't stand it! I never was a cart-horse, you know!"

"Have some champagne!" invited Gail.

"Well, I really don't know . . . I've had so many whiskies . . . believe me, I needed them!"

"It won't do you any harm," Gail assured her; and noticing Pallent and Reggie edging through the door, she signalled to them. She understood well what she had owed to-night to their coolness and efficiency. Even Hughie, who was lurking behind them in his sports jacket, and whose contribution had been to tread on her train and pull the gathers out just before she went on, she felt she could now forgive.

They formed a comradely little group with her for a minute, drinking her health; then Monty exclaimed, "My God! am I seeing things?"

The door had softly opened a few inches, and a worried face was peering through the crack. It was Mr Zaleski. Frowning, he worked his way round the door, and revealed himself in evening dress that bagged and sagged everywhere. The white waistcoat, upturned at the corners, had huge black onyx buttons; the shirt was held together by diamond studs as large as rosettes; his boots . . . but, no, why court disbelief by mapping them? Suddenly his beady little eyes concentrated; he had seen Gail. At once he began to plough his way through the guests, followed by Mrs Zaleski, squat, yellow-faced, with thick lips sourly twisted and black greased hair piled in a knot on the top of her head. Indifferent to the toes he trod upon, the elbows he jerked, the glasses whose contents he spilled over expensive gowns, he fought his

way up to Gail and lunged at her with his hand. "Slumjunctions!" he declared.

"Meaning, Zaleski," suggested Monty, "that Miss Darien was great to-night?"

Zaleski glared at him, and his face seemed to be distorted with agony. Then it split in a painful grin that made it look like a melon sliced in two so as to display the yellow seeds. It was an alarming spectacle, and Gail had some ado to hold her ground. "Solicious!" he murmured, and "Thank you, Mr Zaleski," stammered Gail. She was about to offer him champagne when Athelstan Rigglesworth lounged in between them with a bottle and glass and, uninvited, relieved her of the task. So she let it go at that.

It was late when she at last got the room cleared. Monty had gone off some time before to the stage-director's office, and Evie, tired out, was showing by yawns that she wanted to get Gail undressed and go home. Gail escorted the last of her guests to the passage and shook hands with them; then came back into the room and stopped short. She had been mistaken. Her guests were not all gone. In her arm-chair, close to the dressing-table, sat a familiar figure in the eternal shabby waterproof, his greyish hair straggling over his forehead, a cigarette in his slightly tremulous hand.

"Dr Swing!" she exclaimed, trying to sound cordial. "I didn't even know you had come round!"

"No? . . . I told them at the stage-door I was an old friend and s-showed my card. They let me come in with the crowd: I suppose they weren't turning anyone out to-night." He giggled.

"You knew you had only to come straight in!" answered Gail, sitting down at the dressing-table and smiling at him. "Did you get into the show?"

"Yes-s. You were . . . magnificent, dear! Your voice! Oh, dear me!" He fell silent, gazing at her adoringly, a glistening moisture veiling his pin-point eyes.

Gail, though sorry for him, wished he would go; Evie was fidgeting. Abruptly he seemed to take the hint, and stood up, fumbling in his pockets. "I mustn't stay," he murmured; "but I've something here I've prescribed for you, Gail."

"Prescribed for me? But I'm not ill, Doctor!"

"No!" He felt in one pocket after another and then brought out a small medicine bottle. "But you're going to feel very tired to-morrow . . . after all this strain and excitement. . . . I know s-something of the female temperament, and I'm sure you'd be the better for a pick-me-up. Here it is!"

He set the bottle upright on the table with some difficulty. Gail took it up and looked at it, tilting the reddish liquid doubtfully. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh! just one of my mixtures. I've given it to s-several actresses.

... Do you no harm! Take it before you go on to-morrow night! ... Don't give yourself an overdose any time, that's all. My prescriptions have a k-kick in them!" He took his leave and drifted out.

"Peugh! I wouldn't take anything *he* prescribed!" declared Evie. "Makes me goosey, he does! ... Give me your frock, dear!"

"I shan't take it," said Gail. "Unless I feel all in some night, perhaps."

When Monty, after leaving Gail's informal reception, went back to the office, he found Zharkov there, reading a pile of letters Monty's secretary had left for him to sign.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

Zharkov ignored his irony. "Look, Monty!" he said. "This letter you write to the B.B.C. about broadcasting the show ... we must be very careful."

"Why? I should have thought all we had to do now was to plug the show for all it's worth. I've had the usual enquiries, too, from the Blue Bandoliers and others. ... I could find their letters if you'd allow me to come to my desk."

Zharkov stood back, mumbling some sort of apology. "We must be very careful," he repeated, "vith the bands as well."

"Why?" demanded Monty again. "We've two smash-hit numbers, the 'Park' and the 'Lytham Rhythm.'"

"My dear Monty!" Zharkov puffed out his moist red lips. "Neither of them is music!"

"The public think it is; you heard 'em to-night!" laughed Monty.

"The dear Eenglish public!" sneered Zharkov. "Look, Monty! We don't want to plug Peter Warner; he vill cost us quite enough as it is!"

"It's Melodeon we'll be paying," remarked Monty.

"It does not matter who it is! Warner is no musician, and he thinks himself the earth! He told *me* I had nothing to teach him when I suggested improvements in that Park song!"

Monty chuckled. "Don't be hard on a young man just feeling his feet!"

"Why should we help him to kick us around vith them? If there are to be broadcasts ... if we are to pay plug-money to the big bands, then the numbers to choose are my 'Valse of the Rose' and my arrangement for the Ballet of the Lake."

"*Swans' Lake*," muttered Monty absently. "I beg your pardon, Grigori. What do you want me to do?"

"Don't send this letter! Don't write to Blue Bandoliers! ... Who wants to see Peter Warner puffed up? Are we Melodeon ... yes?"

Monty paused a second; then "*Les absents ont toujours tort*," he said inwardly. "All right, Grigori!" he told his fellow director, and tore up his letter to Broadcasting House.

Zharkov left him soon after that, and lighting a cigar Monty began to open a little pile of letters that he had not had time to deal with before the performance. He read them in his own way, holding them up in front of his horn-rims and running through them at half-arm length; then turning them over and twisting them in his fingers while he made whistling movements with his lips, a little like a snake-charmer. Then he would lay them flat on the table in front of him and read them again frowning, before putting them away with an inscrutable face into folders. One or two that had been marked "Private" he set flame to from his petrol-lighter and dropped into a big ash-bowl. Monty Du Parc was shy of wastepaper baskets: he had found them too useful himself.

He had been engaged for some time upon this work when the door opened behind him and the fireman's head came through. "Eh! I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I didn't know you were here, and I saw the light under your door."

"You were quite right, Fireman!" answered Monty. "What's the time, then?"

"Past one, Mr Du Parc."

"Good Lord, is it? I must have been left behind by everybody."

"Not quite, sir. The young lady, Miss Darien's still in her room. She ought to be gone, you know, by the rules, but I didn't want to press her, like. Perhaps you——"

"Yes, I'll go at once. Her dresser's gone, I suppose? I hope she's not feeling bad. . . . Reaction, you know!" He put on his soft hat and overcoat, and switched off the lights. The fireman promptly turned on his torch, which threw a pale circle round Monty's figure, lank in the long black overcoat, the two dabs of moustache standing out on his grey face. "Excuse me, sir," said the fireman, stretching forward a hand to scrunch out the smouldering ashes of Monty's cigar.

Monty went down the passage, tapped on Gail's door, then, without waiting for a reply, went in.

She was sitting at her dressing-table in her street clothes, staring into the mirror. Monty, as he came across behind her, read the desperation of her eyes in the glass.

"Gail?" he said softly, and as she did not answer, "Gail, aren't you going home?"

She gave a violent start, showing how far away she had been. "Monty! . . . You gave me such a turn!" she said, tittering nervously.

"It's past one, do you know? Whatever have you been doing?"

"I don't know, really. . . . Those people stayed. . . . I thought we'd never get rid of them. . . . Then I let Evie go to catch the last car. . . . Then I sort of felt I couldn't move."

"Too tired?" He seated himself on the edge of the dressing-table, looking down at her.

"No. . . . At least, I suppose I must be. . . ."

Her voice died away, and he saw that she was trembling all over.

"What's the matter, child?" he asked.

A sob burst from her. "It doesn't seem worth while . . . 'going home,' as you call it."

"Oh, but you must! You need sleep. Things'll seem better in the morning—when you read your notices." Privately he was puzzled at her extreme prostration over Derek's flight. Surely those two had never got on at all? The husband had seemed to him a tiresome fellow . . . used as he was to the theatrical exhibitionist in all his manifestations.

"I c-can't go back to that place alone to-night, Monty," sobbed Gail, "and face his hat and s-stick still hanging in the hall. This has all been my fault. . . . I've such a bitter tongue!"

"I can't easily believe that, Gail!"

"Yes, I have. . . . And now he's gone with that woman who'll never take care of him . . . the hardest bitch I ever met, Beryl Warner!"

"Couldn't Peter have stopped it?" enquired Monty. "He must have realized what was going on, if you didn't. . . . Or did they throw dust in his eyes? . . . That's hard to believe, too."

"I don't know—I don't know!" She hid her face in her hands, crying despairingly. In her mind there still danced like scorching fire the smug and heartless phrases of Derek's farewell letter. He had dramatized himself thoroughly as the man who had had the courage to end an impossible situation.

"That was as plain to you really as it was to me; but you never had the courage to face up to yourself. I couldn't be what you wanted me to be; and if you went on believing still that you loved me, it was partly masochism, and partly pride, because at bottom you remain a thoroughly conventional woman. But I can't let your ideas bring you to unhappiness as they would have brought me, but for a miracle, to frustration. No doubt censorious people and affectionate friends will call me bad names for giving you this shock within a few hours of your first night. I don't read the situation that way at all. I believe an actor (or an actress) often pulls out the best when dead up against it. In spite of this, you will make a big hit, dear, in a type of show I abhor. And in any case, I had no choice, as to delay would have meant losing this chance in Ireland."

And he had ended by underlining an address to which he desired her to forward as soon as possible any stuff of his left at the flat. . . .

Monty interrupted her torturing reflections by touching her shoulder. "Listen!" he said; "I'm going to run you out to Lowther Avenue in my car; and if you like to let me come in for a little while and sit with you while you have your supper . . . nonsense! of course

you must eat something or you *will* be ill! . . . well, it may take the edge off that lonely feeling."

"Oh no!" she answered nervously, drying her eyes with her handkerchief. "You mustn't trouble! I'll get them to ring for a taxi."

"At this hour? My dear, you haven't an earthly! . . . Let me, anyhow, run you out there. I won't come in if you're too tired."

Suddenly she abandoned the fight. "Just as you say, Monty!" she murmured.

IV

Peter Warner could never afterwards remember exactly how he passed the hours of that night after he had run from the theatre. Luckily for him it was a warm summer night without rain or much wind. He wandered up and down at first with a hurried step as though pursued . . . which indeed he was by his own tormenting thoughts. At one time he found himself down by Fox Hall among the little, old, yellow-plastered houses and inns with maritime names where the original natives of Blackpool had plied their fishing and their humble trades, the moonshine turning the narrow, silent streets into an antique print. Then he was tramping past an endless brick wall behind the Central station; and then he was in a bar-lounge of which he never knew the name, gazing at the array of gaily-coloured bottles on the mahogany shelves behind the counter, and repudiating their temptation. There would come back to him a repulsive couple whispering over their glasses at a small table, the woman in a red hat with large rings on her fat fingers, the man in an overcoat and a bowler too small for his heavy jowl. There, too, Peter was accosted by a local journalist he knew, who congratulated him on his "triumph," and asked curiously why he was not in the Palatine Gardens. "I've only been doing the front," said the journalist. "Spotting the celebrities and all that; but you've got a smasher, Mr Warner! . . . Have a drink?"

Peter had mumbled excuses . . . and soon after that it must have been that he had stood for a moment hesitant, opposite the vestibule of the theatre, when Bob Forshaw saw him. But he turned away again, and coming upon an unoccupied taxi, jumped in and told the man to drive him to North Shore. There he got out close to Uncle Tom, paid off the cab, and seated himself on an iron bench at the summit of the artificial crags with their Alpine rock-gardens, to rest.

The tranquillity up here was soothing; the moon glittered in an unclouded sky, and sent silver sweeps over the faintly whispering sea at the foot of the cliffs. A peace, born in good part, no doubt, of sheer exhaustion, began to steal over the distraught lover, the anguished musician. He would never see Gail again, unless from some seat he had paid for in a theatre. How should he dare? Even if there were not evidence so damning of his collusion with Derek and Beryl that no woman could be expected to believe his denials, still he was

essentially responsible for her calamity. If she had never met him . . . if he had not forced his acquaintance upon her . . . Beryl would never have entered into her life to wreck it. She must for ever now hate the sight of Beryl's brother. There was no escape: he must shoulder his doom.

As he bowed his head in acceptance, there swelled up in his heart, and broke like a wave over all his being, such a passion of love for Gail Darien that his earlier longings and pangs seemed but a child's mood. It was an agony like a death-wound, and yet, like the touch of the spear of Amfortas, it was a healing pain. If only, he fancied, he could remain in this spot for ever, still, and bathed in this poignant emotion, nothing would be able to hurt or disturb him any more. In some profound sense he could not explain, he felt united to her by this new love, beyond the flesh, beyond all ordinary human intercourse, one with her in an intimacy of sorrow of which no mischance, no hostile power could ever rob him.

So unreal had his surroundings grown, so close the dark-blue dome, with its powder of stars, through which he seemed to float disembodied; so high was he lifted above time as well as place, that he was unconscious how, when, the theme first came to him. It seemed a song as yet without words . . . unfolding flower-like, with a tenderness like petals dropping one by one, and yet with an undercoursing strength, like the vital sap in a stem, the sap of love that survives the dropping of the bloom. Ah! if God would but allow him to complete his melody . . . to dedicate it in silence and secrecy to Gail . . . then the ruin of his life, of which he was now assured, need not have been in vain!

In this transport he did not hear, or did not trouble to turn his head, when a car whirled past on the cliff-drive. It turned into Lowther Avenue, stopped, and the engine died away. Then the doors slammed, and feet were heard ascending the stone steps of a house. After which the street fell silent again, the lamps of the car burning steadily in the solitude.

Peter must have dropped off to sleep where he sat without knowing it, for he was roused by a policeman shaking him and asking him if he had no address. Hurriedly he gave Jack Kelham's, then, on the admonition of the constable, made off as if in quest of it. But when he reached South Shore he slipped down a stair to the sands, and huddled himself against the sea-wall to await the dawn.

It came up behind him at last, waking the sea to a grey and awesome solemnity; and, shivering, Peter climbed up the stair in hopes of finding some early-opening café. His mind was made up now that, as soon as he had breakfasted, he would collect his baggage at the station and take the first train back to London, there to bury himself and his dead illusions. But first he must get some hot coffee, if he could.

What he came upon, however, in place of a café, was a newsagent's, where a bicycle stood outside, and the proprietor within, in a cap and shirt-sleeves, was counting his bundles of papers and marking them, by the light of a solitary bulb.

"We're noan open yet!" he declared as Peter appeared uncertainly in the doorway.

"Forgive me," said Peter, "but could you let me have a paper . . . a local one, for choice . . . all the same? I've a special reason for asking. I want to see any notice there may be of the show last night at the Palatine Gardens. I—I may not look like it, but I'm the composer . . . one of 'em."

The man looked up from his work and grinned. "And so you conna wait to hear your sentence, laike. . . . Nay, but you look fair clemmed! What's to do wi' thee? Been walkin' up and down all night? . . . Well, I'st oblige you this once." He plucked a wrapper from a roll. "Here's *Lancashire Daily Post*," he said, "and *Daily Dispatch*. That should have summat about thee in't. . . . Ay, and *Liverpool Daily Post*, here 'tis. . . . And *Daily Mail* and *Express*, Northern editions, they'll give piece to show."

Peter with chilled fingers tried to open the papers, dropped them, spread them at last on the counter, and began to pore over them. The newsagent bent over his shoulder, full of interest. The head-lines told their story. "Blackpool's Summer Show"—"Palatine Gardens Revue"—"Melody and Fun"—"Young Composer's Triumph"—"Blackpool Acclaims New Singer."

"Here's another!" said the newsagent, thrusting a Manchester paper on Peter. With a mumble of gratitude he took it, and read:

"Bright music makes the success of the new Blackpool summer show. An enchanting soprano singer and a sumptuous production give full value to the haunting melodies of a young British musician, Peter Warner. . . ."

"Noan so bad, eh?" demanded the newsagent. "Are you Peter Warner? . . . Then, you've made it, lad! . . . Ay, and your success is goin' to cost you . . . let me see . . . just sixpence for t'papers!"

Nevertheless, Peter left by the first London train, shutting his eyes to the allurements of the landladies of Coop Street, displayed on the walls by the side of the line, and not even sticking his head out of the window for a last glimpse of the Tower.

CHAPTER SIX

I

PETER'S first two or three days alone in London were as bad as he had expected. But daily life cannot be sustained on the level of high tragedy, and when, nearly a fortnight after he had left Blackpool, he received a telegram from Gail, "Don't be silly. Aren't you coming to see me?" he yielded at once and took the next train back.

But he got little consolation from his visit. Walking up and down with him on the sands below the North cliff, she talked banalities about the show, the size of the audiences, and so on, until she abruptly asked him if he had any news about Derek.

He answered, no. Beryl was not given to writing letters, and she knew what he thought of her.

"What's the use of being wild with her now?" asked Gail languidly.

"But I am! There are times when I could hate Beryl—if I wasn't always a little sorry for a girl cursed with her temperament."

"I don't think I hate her," said Gail slowly. "Or Derek either, if it comes to that. . . . Well, you can't really hate anyone you've once loved, can you? You just learn not to trust anybody!"

"Meaning me? Gail, you've got to listen to the truth!" And he blurted out the whole wretched story of Derek's telegram and how he had taken it on himself.

"What a silly thing to do!" she said, when his self-defence had at last faltered away.

"Do you suppose I haven't cursed myself . . . loathed myself . . . hour after hour since for my idiocy . . . my criminal idiocy?"

"Well, I'm glad to know the truth," she said. "We can, at any rate, be friends again now."

"Thank God for that at least!" replied Peter, and then she astonished him.

"If only you hadn't run away that night!" she cried. "I needed you, Peter. . . . Oh, how I needed you!"

"But, Gail, after the look you gave me——"

"You shouldn't have gone by my look . . . or by anything I might have said . . . but by what you ought to have known I felt! Oh, how different everything might have been!"

"How—different? I don't understand?"

"When have you ever? . . . Sorry, Peter!" She seized his hand and squeezed it remorsefully. "That wasn't fair! I'm being a brute. Did you ever realize before what a beast I can be? I didn't!"

Peter stared at her in bewilderment. There was a change in her beyond what Derek's desertion could account for . . . a more profound

trouble . . . a recklessness in her eyes . . . an air (he could not escape the impression, however hard he tried) of being ashamed of something.

"Gail!" he burst out. "Oh, Gail darling, what has happened? For God's sake, tell me! I know I'm a fool . . . I see all my mistakes when it's too late!"

"Yes, it's too late!" she interjected, stooping to pick up a shell, gazing for a moment into the shining blue of its inside, and then hurling it towards the sea.

"But," he continued, "tell me, do, what's making you so miserable! It isn't Derek, I'm sure! . . . I shall go plumb crazy if I have to go back to London leaving you like this!"

"Going away again?" she asked with a faint irony, turning her face from him and staring out to sea.

He drove his fists into his jacket pockets with a feeling of desperation. "Do you wish me to stay?" he blurted out.

"It's too late!" she repeated inexorably. "We must go back, Peter. There's a man coming to show me a car at half-past five."

"Another car?" he said vaguely.

"Yes. I couldn't keep that Noah's Ark Derek used to drive about in, looking smug. . . . Besides, it was a last year's model. I've a friend who's showing me a new one in advance of the market. Has an engine like a dream, he says; shoot you from here to London like a sun-beam travelling! That's the blah they all talk . . . but speed's my mania . . . for the moment. . . . Coming to see the show to-night? It's wonderful!"

"No," said Peter dully. "I'll get back to Town."

In silence they climbed the long stairway to the top of the cliff side by side. And there, at the top, waiting for them, was a tall figure in smart, grey, pin-striped flannel, with a pink carnation in the button-hole. "Afternoon, children!" said Monty Du Parc. "I saw you gathering shells together—very charmingly!"

II

Had Peter stayed and gone to the theatre that night, some rumour, some snatch of gossip about the leading lady might have reached his ears and opened his eyes. But instead he went back to London, to be whirled into preliminary conferences for Fizz's next big show, to be brought out some time next spring at the Parthenope. Just when would depend on how long the enormously successful revival of the Edwardian musical comedy *Maid of Malaya* (which had been brought out this summer after the necessary redecoration and reconstruction of the historic theatre) continued to fill its huge capacity. But it was agreed that this time Peter should be author of the whole work, book and music, and that Gail should be the star, with Bobo Baggaley supporting. Even if he had not believed in her professional future, Bob For-

shaw would have had to promise Bobo something good after the fearful scenes she had made when he had shown her "the Duke" restored to his normal functions as door-keeper at the Paragon Ball-room. "You got me all wrong, Mr Bob Forshaw!" she had stormed. "A joke's a joke, but I'm used to good breedin'! Where do you think I was brought up?" Mr Forshaw had to confess that he could not conjecture; but he apologized, and in the end they had been reconciled—in the tenderest manner—and Bobo's insolence to everybody now marked her sense of Fortune's favours. Peter suggested that the new musical should be named *In Modern Mood*, and was told to give himself entirely to the completion of it.

He might seem, therefore, to have every cause for self-congratulation. But, with the bewilderment of the idealist who habitually defies the wisdom of the proverbs, he was already tasting the dusty flavour of the nut called success. He didn't worry much—not as much as a sensible man should have done—over the iniquity of the arrangement whereby Melodeon were raking in the prodigious royalties, home and continental, on the theatre, concert, and band performances of his numbers from *Blackpool Breezes*, together with the radio and gramophone rights, while he continued to draw just his quarterly £150. After all, this bad contract would not run for ever, and he had set out in life to make music, not millions. But there soon came a time when neither the deference of the directors of Fizz nor his inability to turn on the radio or dine out in a restaurant without hearing "The Park Nobody Knows" or the "Lytham Rhythm" began to pall. They did not make his Chelsea rooms any less cold and lonely.

So that when he heard that Gail, after a holiday at the end of the Blackpool show in October, was going to Liverpool to play Principal Boy in a big Fizz pantomime there, he suddenly made his own decision, and went to stay in a small pension in the South of France, where the theatrical *décor* of the *côte d'azur*, with its cerulean skies, umbrella pines, and brightly tinted houses, encouraged steady work upon the score of *In Modern Mood*.

In a café of the little town, not far from Nice, he also met M. Levasseur, a retired musical director, who had travelled opera companies in the works of Offenbach, Planquette, Lecocq, and Messager for years through the French provinces, and had "ghosted" for such modern continental composers as—well, it would be indiscreet to say. M. Levasseur, after some preliminary sour contempt, had been touched by the single-mindedness of the young English musician, and, at the price of a few pale-coloured cigars and many *mazagrans*, had taught Peter more about effective harmony and orchestration for light opera than he had learnt before in all his life. So that by the spring he was able to dispatch to All-Star House a practically complete orchestral score of *In Modern Mood*, which M. Levasseur (despite certain scruples about its modernistic dissonances) had passed as *vraiment du métier*.

Early in May an urgent telegram from Fizz recalled Peter himself to London, where, on the morning after his arrival, he was received at All-Star House with open arms by Forshaw and politely by Zharkov—though he was somewhat surprised at Monty Du Parc's absence from the reunion. After hearing a good deal about the plans for the production and the probable date of opening, some time at the beginning of June, he lunched alone and took a stroll in Hyde Park, to see the young leaves on the trees.

As he strolled westwards from Hyde Park Corner, thinking of professional matters, his ear was caught by a quick beat of horse-hoofs coming towards him along the Row. Glancing up, he caught sight of a girl approaching at a gallop on a powerful, foam-flecked black horse, with a pot-hatted groom from the livery stables behind her. The next moment the mass of blonde curls floating round the uncovered head of the ardent equestrienne struck Peter as familiar, and when she pulled up her mount with a firm hand at the crossing by Albert Gate, an electric shock went through his veins as he recognized Gail Darien.

He stared amazed at the lithe figure in blue coat, buff breeches, and workmanlike boots, sitting with a mastery very different from the attitude of the apprehensive horsewoman who had accompanied him on the Downs at Brighton. At the same moment her eyes fell on the lonely promenader under the trees, and she recognized him in her turn. "Peter!" she called in a ringing voice, and trotted over to the railings to greet him. "This is a surprise!" she said, bending down from the saddle to shake hands. "I didn't even know you were back in England! Why on earth haven't you been to see me?"

"I only got back last night, darling," answered Peter, "in answer to an S.O.S. from Forshaw." He stood watching her against the pink spires of the chestnut blossom, while her fretful beast pawed back, making his coat glint in the sunshine, and with an easy bend of her body and application of her leg, she brought him up to the bit again. "I couldn't believe it was you, at first!" he said.

"No, nobody rides here in the afternoon, do they? Terribly unfashionable, I know. But I couldn't get this horse in the morning, and I wanted a real gallop. The Inspector's less fussy about your speed when the Row's empty, too. Isn't he, Dick?"

The groom grinned. "I shouldn't count on that, Miss!" he said. "I've been expecting him to pop out from the trees all the way from Knightsbridge, the style you let Lancer out. . . . I was just wondering whether you'd be able to pull him up at all!"

"You've become a regular rough-rider, Gail!" said Peter.

"Yes, I've worked at it this winter," she answered. "Out most mornings before breakfast . . . makes you eat like a pig . . . jumping lessons . . . and I even managed to get in a little hunting last autumn, and didn't do so badly. It's true I had a first-class pilot, a nice boy in the Guards who says it's war this year." Peter felt a

jealous pang, but she swept on, "What are you doing now? Anything important? . . . Then come along to my flat for tea! I've a million questions to ask you."

She sprang supply out of the saddle, gave her reins to the groom, and put her string-gloved hand through Peter's arm as they crossed the fan together to find a taxi. "If you'd only arrived next week," Gail told Peter, "my new limousine would have been here—it's a smasher!"

II

After giving her address to the driver, Gail accepted a cigarette from Peter, and leaned back luxuriously, stretching out her long legs. "My mane's as unruly as ever, isn't it?" she said, pushing her hair back from her face.

"You've given up that talk about wearing it short, I hope?" said Peter.

"I'm not sure," she replied tormentingly. "Long hair's out . . . in Hollywood, at any rate!"

"But you're not going to Hollywood," he insisted. "You're signed up for my new piece!"

"On the dotted line, sir!" she admitted, "and I've begun to learn your music. Lucky for me, wasn't it, I didn't go into Athelstan's play instead!"

"His famous poetic drama for music? Has it been produced, then? I didn't know."

"Where *have* you been? They put it on in February with a woman from Vienna in the part he wanted me to play in. He was wild when I refused, after reading it, and said I couldn't honestly recommend Fizz to accept it. . . . But I was right. It was a dire flop; and all the people Athelstan had done dirt to in his time got a bit of their own back, especially his fellow-critics. One of them said that not a line of it scanned except the bits he had meant to be prose. . . . Now, I'm told, he blames me for it all. I can't think why."

The taxi had stopped near Marble Arch at a block of flats in red Victorian Queen Anne with sculptured yellow facings. Peter blinked at their magnificence. As he and Gail went up to the second floor in the self-working lift, "I'm sharing this flat with Pat Worthington," she explained; "you remember her at Blackpool? Until July that is; then she's getting married, and I have to take it on alone."

"Bit of a responsibility, won't that be?" suggested Peter, as he followed her out of the lift.

"Oh, if you begin to worry about responsibilities!" said Gail impatiently, ringing the bell. "Do it first, and rely on something turning up! That's my motto. . . . What the devil's become of Evie?" She rang again, and presently the door was opened by the former theatre dresser in a black dress and laced apron. "Tea, Evie, and quickly!"

"I've a thirst like a horse's!" ordered Gail, her hectoring tone annulled by her smile. "Unless Peter wants cocktails?"

He shook his head. "At this time of the day? No, thank you!"

"Tea, then!"

"Tea for two, and two for tea!"

she hummed as she took Peter's hat from him and hung it up on a peg; then turned to him, saying wickedly, "I shouldn't have done that, should I? Come in! Pat's out, I believe." She threw open a door and took him into her drawing-room.

Peter looked about him, astounded. It was a long room with the tall ceiling of the 'eighties, from the middle of which now depended an electrical fitting shaded by circular tiers of lemon-coloured parchment. Outside the french windows a tortured-iron balcony overlooked the Park, with the dome of the Oratory and the Museum Towers of Kensington beyond. But what struck Peter at once was the obvious costliness of the decoration and furnishing, a delusively simple harmony of pink and grey, with great black cushions on the divan matching the wood of the upright piano. In a niche between the windows stood a glittering fruit-tree in glass; on an octagonal table a Chinese horse carved in grey stone arched its neck; on the wall opposite the window was a single picture, a symphony in blue and silver, showing the classical cornice of the Parthenope overhanging the river in a blend of moonshine and its own upward-flung flood-lights, which, if the signature on it was genuine—and why not?—had certainly not been bought for a song.

So this was how the girl who had for years stifled in the frowsy plush and the litter of vile ornament in cheap provincial lodgings had expressed her liberation—this expensive severity, marred by only one or two indecisions of taste, the crinolined doll, for instance, that served as a telephone cover, the angular caricature of the room's owner with her hair turned to gamboge, by "Kip," which hung beside the fireplace, or the large chromium-framed photograph of her that stood upon the piano. . . . The picture itself was a symbol; the columns of the famous London theatre, drawn—it is X——'s hall-mark—with an outline as squiggly as the reflections of the bridge in the water, stood for attainment. Yes, how logical it all was, but how dear!

"D'you like it, Peter?" Gail asked as she watched his eyes roving round the room.

"Lovely! You ought to have been an interior decorator, Gail!" he answered.

"I waited for it in Wigan," she said simply. "Sit down, Peter, do!" She handed him a shining cigarette-box. "If Pat leaves here in July, as she says, I'll have her two rooms to furnish as well, as she'll take her things with her. So it's high time I started to work again. . . . I shall miss Pat, you know. We get on ideally: we

both know by instinct when we don't want to see each other. . . . But, there, when the show starts, what time shall I have to be lonely at home? I shall be living in the theatre and eating out at places."

Peter wondered why, if that was her intent, she cumbered herself with this expensive home, and planned to spend a lot more money in furnishing it further. Then Evie brought the tea, and Gail, lifting the silver pot to pour out, paused with it in her hand. "Silly to do this with gloves on, isn't it?" she murmured. "Excuse me a minute, Peter!" and she left the room. She was away only a minute or two, during which he looked with pleasure at the score of one of his songs for *In Modern Mood* lying open on the piano. Then she came back with bare hands and poured out his tea for him. "Have you heard anything about Derek?" she asked abruptly over the edge of her cup, as soon as they were settled.

Peter nearly swallowed his tea scalding in his embarrassment as he murmured, "No, nothing! . . . At least, nothing important! I met someone who was with him in a tour of *Candida*—Derek played the poet—but this chap had nothing really to tell."

"I hear that he and your sister are quarrelling like hell already," said Gail coolly. "A cat and dog life! I knew how it would be—didn't you?"

"I can't say," said Peter gravely, "that I ever thought it could turn out very well . . . or last very long. Beryl's . . . well, an unusual girl, and not suited, I should say, to live at peace with a man."

"Well, he can't say it's my fault . . . can he . . . if he's miserable now?"

"Of course he can't," murmured Peter, somewhat disconcerted. And for the sake of something to say, "Do you expect them to part?" he added.

"I should worry! Anyhow, how the hell should I know what they mean to do?" She was swinging her booted leg angrily over the arm of her chair, and her mouth, as she raised her cigarette to it, was hard.

Peter laid his cup back on the tray. It was evident she had forgotten her duties as hostess in the stress of her reflections. "Gail," he said, "if I'm speaking out of my turn, please forgive me. But if—if Beryl throws Derek over—"

"Or he shakes himself free of Beryl," suggested Gail acidly.

"Quite . . . either way," agreed Peter. "Would you, in that case, take him back?"

She sat in silence for a minute, drawing the last breath from her cigarette and sending the smoke through her delicate nostrils. Then she started up in her chair, grinding the cigarette out on her saucer. "Have some more tea!" she said. "Whatever am I thinking about? . . . Have some cake; eat something, Peter!"

He checked her with an almost impatient gesture. "Won't you answer my question, please?" he said. "Do tell me: would you have Derek back?"

She sat still again for a minute, her legs drawn up under her in the big arm-chair, staring at a black bowl of flowers on the mantelpiece. Then she turned and looked straight at Peter with eyes that gave him a shock. They seemed, not merely topaz-tinted, but topaz stones.

"No!" she rapped out, "definitely no! I've had plenty of time to think since that night. I've lain awake for hours going over my time with Derek . . . the best years of my life he had, and what have I got out of it? I'm getting middle-aged—you needn't smile, Peter, I am; I'm getting lines, and I'll soon have to begin thanking God for make-up, on *and* off—but that isn't the point. Derek's killed something in me. I gave him everything I had, and he showed it was worth an old tie to him! I wouldn't go through the routine a second time, thank you, however hard he might plead! . . . Not that there's the least reason to suppose he will. He also doubtless thinks he's got a good riddance, and I dare say he's right. Oh, lots of people would say he's right!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Gail!" Peter broke out.

"But it's true! . . . Anyhow, I'm through with Love with a capital 'L,' as I expect Derek is by now. He taught me. Your sister, I guess, will have taught him."

"As if you were through with love!" declared Peter, driven by mounting anger. "At your age! With your beauty and temperament! Tell me next you're going into a nunnery!"

"I shouldn't tell you any such nonsense! I have the ordinary needs, but they needn't be wrapped up in all these fine veils!"

"Oh, stop, Gail! You mustn't go on like this! It's not you that's talking . . . not the real Gail!"

"And how much do you know about the real Gail?" she asked with a scorn that smote him.

"I know this much!" he cried, recovering himself and leaping out of his chair. "You couldn't have talked like this a year ago . . . not even when you first went to Blackpool for the show, you couldn't! What's happened to you since has changed you!"

"I'll say it has!" she interjected with such desolate bitterness that he stopped short, staring at her. For an instant it came to him that something other than Derek's desertion must have happened to blight her. But he could not imagine what it might be, and he had something more urgent to think of at the moment.

"Do, darling, listen to me!" he pleaded, "and don't let resentment and disillusionment make you hard! It's only a little over a year, isn't it, since I kissed you up on the Downs? You knew then, of course, what I felt for you, and I think that just for the moment

it was touch and go whether you would have come to me—Derek or no Derek! . . . But in the end you wouldn't; and I've come to understand why, since. It was because you still loved Derek—with a part of you. He'd got too deeply entrenched inside you during those years of your marriage. At the time I only felt that you had some profound reason for recoiling; and, though it hurt me like hell, I didn't try to force you. I could never do that, Gail, however much I wanted you!"

She bent forward with her elbows on her knees, looking away from him at the screen over the fire-place. "You're much too good, Peter," she said in a low voice.

"Well," he resumed, "at Blackpool, on that dreadful night"—he laughed harshly—"that dreadful night of my success and yours, I could do nothing because you were so mad with me, and I don't blame you. After all, it was my sister who had done the filthy thing. So I went away."

"Yes, you went away," she repeated in a deep, resentful tone. "Have we to go over all that again?"

"I hope not, indeed! Because I've come back; and since you tell me you're definitely through with Derek at last, I can say what I've been wanting to say—"

"Stop, Peter, please!" she cried. "You don't understand; it's no use! Please, *please* stop!"

"But I won't stop—this time! Gail, I know I'm streets away from being your equal; yet I feel it's given to me to understand you better than anybody else . . . to realize all there is in you. If you'd let me give my life to you . . . if you'd only let me try . . . we'd make a fine thing, I believe we'd make a great thing of it together! Won't you let my love wake the flame in you again? Won't you let me make a life for you that'll be warm and happy? . . . Gail, oh, Gail! wipe out everything that's happened since that day on the Downs, and let's think we're back at the moment when I took you in my arms! Only, this time don't draw back! Don't be afraid! Come to me now, darling! . . . Gail, come now!"

He advanced towards the arm-chair in which she was huddled, to draw her up into his arms. But before he could seize her, she sprang suddenly upright, confronting him tense, straight as a spear, her legs pressed together, her head thrown slightly back, the lids making a slit of her eyes, as though she were levelling some inner force of repulsion at him. A deathly cold seemed to breathe from her Amazonian figure: all the power of evoking an atmosphere that was her birthright as an actress was being used against him now, he felt, in ruthless sincerity.

"Gail!" he groaned, stepping backwards. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"It's too late now!" she answered. "I can't let you love me!"

"Too late?" he asked. "But why? . . . Is there someone else?"

It seemed an eternity before she slowly opened her great eyes to the full and looked into his "No," she said. "There's no one else now—I can give you my word for that. Only I can't love you that way, as things are. . . . Oh, but I do love you, Peter! . . . I wanted your friendship so much!" She rested her forehead against the mantel-piece, and he saw the tears on her cheek.

Silently he took in his own the hand that lay slack at her side, and kissed it. "Whatever you want from me, darling," he said, "is yours. You know that. Now give me a cigarette and let me say good-bye."

She came with him to the front door and kissed his cheek as he took leave of her. But he went down the dim staircase with its yellow stained glass numbed with grief.

III

As Gail shut the door on Peter, she noticed that the glass-backed letter-box was full of envelopes. She took them out, and found that most of them were of the depressing oblong shape. Opening them as she walked back into the drawing-room, she found, as she had expected, that most were bills, few receipts. Three months owing on the hire-purchase for the furniture: she must do something about that. Celeste, the dress-maker, writing politely but urgently to enclose her bill and ask for something on account. Gail picked up the bill, which had fallen out on to the carpet, and saw with a feeling of stupefaction that it amounted to £243 18s. 3d. How these things ran up! She must take Celeste £10 and another order to-morrow, though the new-order device was wearing a bit thin, now that she had been so many weeks without working.

She examined a couple more of the accounts that had come by the same post, and asked herself, "Am I being a fool?" Then, with an almost frightened gesture, she shovelled the whole lot of bills into a drawer, already crammed, of her glass-handled writing-table, went to the door and called, "Evie, run my bath!"

After a moment or two she heard the water running into the green marble bath she had put in at her own expense to replace the funereal Victorian sarcophagus she had found when she took the flat. The sound was soothing and reassuring to her. "Evie!" she shouted again. "Come along to the bedroom and help me off with my boots, will you?"

In a minute Evie's flat feet were heard coming along the passage, and there was a short but intense tussle, at the end of which Gail rose, laughing and free, from the side of the bed, while Evie rubbed her person ruefully. "When are you going to remember to get a

boot-jack as you promised, dear?" she asked. "Every time you go out in the Row I'm black and blue afterwards, and it don't seem fair! You get the fun of the riding, and I get the sore places where by rights you should have 'em!"

Gail had just got herself into her bath-robe when the telephone rang in the sitting-room, and she ran through to answer it. "Yes," she said, "speaking! . . . Oh, is that you, Monty? . . . No, I don't think so, not to-night. . . . No, I'm not going out *anywhere*! I mean to stay at home and practise. I do occasionally, you know. . . . No, I must get to bed early. The last three nights it's been past two before I got in, and last night it was nearer four. . . . Where had I been? Only the Gimcrack Ball. . . . But look, Monty, can we dine somewhere to-morrow instead? I want to see you, rather importantly. . . . I'll tell you when we meet. Call for me here half-past eightish? . . . Good! . . . So long!" She laid down the receiver and called, "Evie! Run some more hot water into the bath, will you? I'm sure it's got freezing cold while I've been talking here."

"It'll be hot enough to boil you still, dear!" answered Evie from the kitchen, where she was chopping parsley on a board.

"I *like* being boiled and you know it!" retorted her mistress. "Never mind! I'll do it myself!"

"Don't forget," called Evie, "that you left your ring on the glass shelf above the basin during tea!"

"I know I did. It's all right."

But Gail had hardly dipped her toes into the steaming water, from which mounted the aromatic perfume of bath-salts, when the telephone buzzed again. "Oh, good little Guardian Angel!" she cried. "Don't you *want* me to be a clean girl? . . . Never mind, Evie! It's sure to be for me!"

With her damp toes thrust into heelless mules, she shuffled back to the telephone, and again plucked off the almond-eyed, leering doll that covered it. "Yes? Who is it?" she demanded crisply.

"*C'est vous, chérie?*" answered a loud voice.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"*Mais, c'est le Baron, vous savez! Vous m'avez donc oublié?*" roared the voice.

"Just a minute!" cried Gail, wrapping her bath-robe more securely round her. She had just recollected that the telephone stood under a side-window through which she was accustomed to be watched, whenever she made her appearance there, by a gentleman living on the opposite side of the narrow street—a racing man apparently, for he always had field-glasses glued into his eyes. "Now," she said when she had readjusted herself. "Will you kindly say who is speaking?"

But the reply came in such a noisy torrent of unintelligible French

words that she called "Stop! Stop! Do you want Miss Patricia Worthington, by any chance?"

"Patricia, non! Qu'est que c'est, cette Patricia? Je veux Meess Gail Dahrien! Vous ne la savez pas, la petite Gail?"

"If you don't stop talking rubbish and tell me who you are, I shall hang up!" screamed Gail, stamping her chilly feet on the floor.

"Oh, don't do that, dear, or you'll miss something to your advantage!" replied the voice of Jack Kelham.

"Jack, you pig! Do you know, you fetched me out of my bath and I'm fr-r-rozen!"

"Sorry, darling, but when can I see you? I've something pretty good on the stocks that may interest you. What about a cup of cocoa at a car-drivers' pull-up?"

"What about some cocktails here at seven? . . . Can you bring Nita with you? . . . That's grand! It's good to hear your voice, Jack . . . and I expect everybody else in the block's saying the same thing. . . . How's the car going?"

"I've sold it."

"Never. Who on earth to?"

"A girl who wants to take up horse-riding."

"How lucky!"

"You don't understand! She wants the car to run out to Richmond Park in!"

"I see. . . . At seven, then!"

She rushed back and jumped straight into the bath. "O-o-oh!" she shrieked. "Evie! It's gone s-s-stone c-c-cold!"

"Turn on the hot tap then, dear. I can't come. I'm making pastry!"

"Make some cocktails, Evie, and put some high explosive in 'em! They're for Mr Jack Kelham! He's coming at seven."

And it really was not much after eight when Jack arrived with Nita, making vague apologies. "Charming flat you have here!" he said, looking round. "Quite delightful! Just the sort of place I've always thought you should have, Gail . . . it might have been made for you!" He could hardly have sounded prouder if it had been his own.

"Yes, dear," said Nita, looking at the lacquered cocktail cabinet with admiration. "And you deserve it, every bit of it, that I will say. . . . Not like some of 'em! You always were a good pal and a proper trouser, dear! And it makes me ever so glad to see you so well off and happy now. . . . It must have cost you a penny, though!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jack, leaning back in an arm-chair with his John Collins and inhaling the smoke of a Turkish cigarette. "It's

not a bit larger than anyone in Gail's position needs. Cosy and compact, I should describe it, and I think you're right not to give yourself the trouble of running a really big flat. I mean, if this suits you, it would be silly to waste money on anything larger. . . . I suppose, by the way, there aren't any of this size or perhaps with a couple of rooms more, to be let in the same block, are there?"

"Jack, don't be ridiculous!" said Nita.

"Well, my dear, we must look out for something better than the hole we're in at present. Once the syndicate's formed——"

"What syndicate, Jack?" enquired Gail.

"That's what I was trying to tell you about on the phone, Gail, only you would keep bursting into French. Between you and me, we've got some of the biggest men in the theatre ready to join. I'm not allowed to mention the names yet, so keep them under your hat! But it will about put the kybosh on Fizz!"

"Good news for me, Jack," laughed Gail, "seeing I've just signed up with them for Peter Warner's new musical!"

"Warner! Thanks for reminding me!" Jack drew out a notebook importantly. "We must get old Peter . . . on a long contract. Of course, strictly between ourselves, he's not all that good. The first time he played 'The Park Nobody Knows' to me on the piano in his digs, it was childish, just childish! A five-finger exercise! I got him to put in that bit tra-la—la-la; tum-ti—tum-tum, which is the making of the tune, though I say it who shouldn't."

"You certainly shouldn't!" assented Nita. "Don't give him any more cocktails, Gail! It's bad for him. He's been like this for the last two months, but his blessed old syndicate never materializes."

"We can't sign the articles of agreement till Perrier—that's our financier, Gail—arrives from Paris."

"Well, why doesn't he, then? It's a quick journey—especially by air!"

"Oh, he'll *come* all right!" declared Jack complacently. "Meanwhile, I get on very well with his London representative. Who do you think it is, Gail?"

"Monty Du Parc," suggested Gail cynically.

Jack grinned. "Not this time—for a wonder! No, but it's somebody else you know very well—Vincent Gynn!"

"Jack, how could you!" exclaimed Gail, shocked.

"That's what I say, dear!" chimed in Nita. "He's gone plain cuckoo!"

"Really, Jack!" said Gail. "You ought to have run the rule over that old rat-bag by now!"

"I have, *chérie*," retorted Jack. "And just because I have, Vincent will never have the chance to play me up again. But when the old brute happens to have got hold of something amazingly good, and offers to let me in on it, why shouldn't I have my cut?"

"Why not?" murmured Nita. "You've asked for it, and a sharp one too! Unluckily, it will fall on me as well, my dear-r-r!"

"I hope, Jack," said Gail anxiously, "you didn't put anything into this syndicate . . . whoever started it?"

"No, dear," Nita answered for him. "That's the one thing he couldn't do, thank God! . . . By the way, you haven't got any sewing you want done, have you? If you've any dresses you want making up, we could have the electric light connected at our flat. Jack got three days' work at Denham last week on a film, and that gave us the gas and the telephone. . . . Oh, it's all right! We're getting straight . . . slowly. But what a comfort it must be to you, my dear, to sit in a gorgeous place like this and know that every blessed thing in it has been paid for!"

"Think so?" said Gail on an irresistible impulse of candour. "Then kindly cast your eye over these!" She ran to the writing-desk and pulled a drawer open. "Bills!" she said, dragging them out by handfuls. "Bills! Look at them!" And with a dramatic gesture she scattered them on the carpet like a snow-drift at her guests' feet. "What do you know about that?" she concluded, almost boastfully.

Jack Kelham grinned with delight at the scene and the situation. "Gail, you are a *lad*!" he declared. "Even I, in my best days, never got together a pile like that! You deserve an Oscar for it!"

"All very well for you to laugh!" retorted Gail. "You don't have to meet them!"

"Nor do you, surely," answered Jack. "Not for a long while, anyway!"

"I can pay some of them when my salary for the new show begins. Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, Monty Du Parc's your man, obviously! Get him to spread the dope about you in the papers quickly! 'Fizz's wonderful new star. . . . Blonde bombshell for the West End in June. . . . Young artist's top-figure salary.' These people won't trouble you after that. Publicity's everything! . . . Decidedly, Gail, Monty's your man!"

"Yes, dear," chimed in Nita. "I really think Jack's right for once."

"Ye-es!" murmured Gail. "I suppose he is." She sat down and began to laugh. "Oh, my dear little Guardian Angel, *what* a bloody fool I'm going to be!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

WHEN Monty Du Parc called at the flat the next evening to fetch Gail for dinner, she opened the door to him herself. "Everybody's out," she said. "Pat's dining and dancing with the boy-friend, and it's Evie's night off. Come in a minute!"

As he followed her into the drawing-room he drew a newspaper cutting from his pocket-book. "I thought you might like to see this," he said. "I'm beginning to get cracking in earnest now on the publicity for the show. I led off this evening with those paragraphs in 'Barn-Stormer's' column in the *Evening Herald*. Nearly all of it about you. I hoped to get Athelstan Rigglesworth to take the story from a different angle in his 'Diary,' but he was very unco-operative, for once. You haven't done anything to get into old Athelstan's hair lately, dear, have you?"

Gail was pinning a spray on to her simple *eau-de-nil* evening gown in front of the mirror. "He's never forgiven me for refusing the part in his play," she answered.

"Well, you'll just have to be extra nice to him during the next four weeks," Monty warned her. "We don't want Athelstan against us, my God!"

"Let me see the cutting, will you?" said Gail, and after reading it thanked him and set it down on the mantel-piece. "Where do we eat?" she asked, picking up her hand-bag.

"That new place, the Colonna, I thought," answered Monty. "Everybody's going there now." And they drove in his car to a street behind Piccadilly, where they descended a mirror-lined staircase to a room with many columns, panelled in crimson striped silk, and lit by hanging crystal chandeliers. It was crowded to suffocation, loud with the talk of those whose trade it is to make an impression on the public, and heavy with the fumes of rich dishes. Both the *maître d'hôtel* and the proprietor himself in evening tails came to greet Monty and led the way to his reserved table in a quiet corner. Here Gail and he seated themselves on a well-cushioned sofa against the wall. The wine steward in his chain was smiling at them almost before they had sat down, and the table waiter was diving for his notebook, with two assistants standing by attentively, as though one mind were not equal to the task of taking down so important an order.

Monty found Gail subdued during dinner, and kept shooting inquisitive and slightly anxious glances at her through his horn-rims as she talked vague theatrical tattle. But she fended off his curiosity until the waiters had brought the coffee, with a liqueur brandy she had at

first refused and then acquiesced in, and they were left undisturbed. Then, at last, "I've something to say to you, Monty," she told him.

"Yes?" He raised his eyebrows.

Gail picked up her hand-bag from the seat beside her and took out a little package, wrapped in paper, which she passed to him under cover of the table.

"What's this?" he asked, looking at it in his palm.

"Your ring, Monty. . . . I—I'm very sorry, but I can't go through with it, after all. I know it wasn't a formal engagement ring, since my divorce isn't even through yet. But you and I understood what it meant, and I think it right you should take it back."

"Bit sudden, isn't it?" His voice was harsh.

"I decided suddenly."

"The day after Peter Warner got back to England, eh?"

"That's nothing to do with it! There's nothing of that sort between me and Peter!"

"'Little Audrey laughed and laughed!' . . . You chose a nice place to spring this on me, didn't you?"

She gave a faint shrug of her shoulders. "Frankly I didn't want a big scene."

"You can be damned hard, can't you, Gail?"

"Yes, and damned soft . . . as you know, Monty."

"Look, Gail! You've got to give me a better reason than this! Ever since Blackpool I've played it as you wished it. I've treated you the whole time, my G—, as if you were wrapped in cellophane, haven't I? . . . Haven't I?"

"I suppose," she said, "you didn't want to risk my not getting my divorce from Derek."

"Oh, *that*! . . . Don't you give me credit for any natural delicacy, then?"

"You wouldn't dream, would you," she asked in a low voice, "of laying a trap for a woman at a moment when she was too shattered to understand or feel——?"

"You managed to forgive me all the same!"

"Nothing seemed to matter just then. I simply drifted."

"And you never cared for me, you say now? Then which of us was led up the garden-path?"

"Monty, I'm sorry if I've misled you. But you've got to take this from me, it's ended!"

"Not unless you give me a reason, Gail, I won't!"

"I can't! . . . No reason you would ever understand!"

"I'm too unperceptive! Is that it?" He laughed sharply and unpleasantly. "Let's see if I am, Gail! When Derek left you like that, you were quite stunned, quite at sea. You needed somebody to lean on, to see you through that black patch and help you to forget. Peter

Warner was the man you'd naturally have turned to. But with his supreme gift for ineffectiveness he wasn't there!"

"Don't pick on Peter again, Monty!" said Gail angrily. "It doesn't raise you in my eyes!"

"Suppose, just for a minute, we do what a woman like you always tries to escape from—look the facts in the face? You used me so long as I was necessary to you; and now that Peter Warner makes one of his flitting reappearances, you throw me over like yesterday's gloves. . . . I suppose I oughtn't to complain," his large, dark eyes were suddenly filled with sadness. "That's what men are for, isn't it? But I'll tell you one thing, Gail; it isn't Peter Warner who's ever going to satisfy you. There's a spice of the Devil in you that's bored by an ineffectual idealist like Peter. It's the most thrilling thing about you, that little pinch of wickedness—when one gets down to it at last! And I'll tell you something more. Until that devil of yours is dragged to the surface, you're never going to be a big success in the theatre. But you're afraid of your devil. I don't know why. Sometimes I think old Bem Middlemast, who played romantic *operettes* till he came to believe in them himself, put his fancies into you with your singing lessons. But those notions are plain silly; they don't correspond with the facts of life; they don't get you anywhere at all. You'll just be letting yourself fade out and preparing for an old age of vain regrets. . . . Oh, you may even become a Dame of the British Empire, and go around on a stick opening hospitals with bouquets and closing meetings with a nicely phrased appeal! But you'll be devilish miserable inside all the time they're cheering you and badgering you with autograph books. And one day there'll be a stone medallion of you in the hall of some dreary academy of acting; but you'll have been that stone mask yourself for years before you die! Tell me honestly, aren't I right?"

"Yes, if life's a series of cocktails, and love just one more with an extra kick to it!"

"God! Next thing I suppose you'll be going all churchy!"

"This is no use, Monty! You're mad with me because I've hurt you. I'm sorry; I had to do it."

"You don't realize what you've done to me, Gail! I wouldn't have believed this of you!"

"I've said I'm sorry to have hurt you. But it's over now. If you've got to hate me for it, you've got to."

Monty, who for a moment had been sitting with his elbow on the table, shading his face with his hand, suddenly looked round at her, with his kindly smile breaking through his grief.

"What's this talk about hating?" he asked. "We stay friends, don't we, Gail?" His eyes were filled with a sort of shining melancholy. "When you think of what we've been through together . . . you can't wipe out the past to that degree, surely? I'm broken up because the

other thing can't be. . . . But it isn't to happen, and I hope neither of us bears malice over that?"

"Thanks, Monty!" said Gail. "I like it better that way."

"All right, then!" He signalled to the waiter. "I'll bring round the bus," he said, as he paid the bill, "and run you home."

"Oh, don't trouble! I'll get a taxi."

"Why? It's all on my way. I'll just drop you at the front hall and speed on to my rooms, where I've a fellow coming to meet me."

Gail felt she could not make further protest without being unparadonably wounding; and on the run out to her flat he was so cool and easy with her that she was glad she had not made a gesture.

As they pulled up at her place, Monty said suddenly, "I wonder if you'd mind my coming up to retrieve my driving-gloves? I left them in your drawing-room when we came out. Silly thing to do, but I won't be a minute collecting them."

"All right," said Gail, after a second's pause.

They went up in the lift; and he followed her inside the flat and through to the drawing-room, where he shut the door behind him.

"I don't see your gloves," she said, switching on the lights. "Do you know where you left them?"

"Yes," he said drily. "In the driver's pocket in my car, where they've been all the time."

"Monty!"

"One has to use a little stratagem sometimes."

"Monty, will you please go at once?"

"Don't be a little fool! Did you think you were going to get away with it as easy as that? A restaurant isn't the place for what I have to say. So, if you don't mind, we'll finish our discussion here."

"I've nothing more to say, and if you don't leave my flat I'll——"

"What'll you do? Everybody's out. You told me so. We're just by our two sweet selves; and before I've finished, we're going to have an understanding, Gail."

She sat down stiffly on a chair. "You can talk," she said; "I'm not listening."

"Aren't you? I think you will! I don't know what your ideas of honour may be, Gail; but it seems to me you've played a pretty shabby game. I was to be kept on a lead, to squire you, to amuse you, to pull all the strings I know in order to build you up as a leading lady—and then, when the moment came, to stand politely aside in favour of your fancy boy! Whatever made you think, my dear, that I was the man you could play for a sucker?"

"Every word of that is a lie, and you know it!" interjected Gail stonily.

"I know every word of it's true, and I'm not standing for it! All this time you've trailed me around, treating you like a marble saint, so as to show respect for the woman who was to become my wife; and

now you throw me over. Well, it won't do, my dear! If you repudiate your bargain, then, by God, to-night's the pay-off! Perhaps it will knock all this d——d nonsense out of you, and make you a reasonable woman again! Come here!"

Gail rose slowly from her chair and looked him in the eye. She did not move.

"Did you hear what I said?" he repeated. "Come here at once, and kiss me . . . properly! Then I might begin to think of forgiving you. . . . Oh, you won't, won't you?"

He seized her as she began to move with her head high towards the door, and flung her violently upon the sofa. She drew up her knees, and as he tried to pin her down, jerked the point of her elbow at the middle button of his waistcoat. His horn-rims fell off, and he bent gasping over the end of the sofa. In a second, like a naiad eluding a faun on a vase, she had darted from the sofa to the fire-place. As she slipped past him he made a clutch at her and ripped the chiffon from her shoulder.

For a moment she crouched glaring at him like a long-faced cat. Then distinctly there came to the ears of them both the click of a latch-key in the front door, and before they could change their attitudes, Pat Worthington entered cheerfully in a gorgeous evening gown. She halted on the threshold. "What on earth——?" she began, gazing at their dishevelled figures; then her expression changed to one of acute embarrassment. "I beg your pardon!" she muttered, and retreated, closing the door behind her.

"Pat!" cried Gail in a loud voice just as the door was shutting; "come back!"

There was an instant's hesitation, and then Patricia appeared again uncertainly in the doorway.

"Come in!" said Gail coolly. "You don't have to go! It's only Monty. . . . We've been having a bit of a rough-house."

"You don't say?" remarked Pat with an upward slant of her celebrated eyebrows.

"Yes!" Gail picked up the newspaper cutting she had left on the mantel-shelf before going out. "Would you believe it, Pat, he didn't want to show me this piece about myself in the *Evening Herald*. . . . Thought it would give me a swelled head, I suppose. . . . So . . . I had to take it from him by force!"

"You schoolgirl, Gail!" tittered Monty. He was sitting, huddled up, in a corner of the sofa, putting his tie straight and polishing the lenses of his recovered horn-rims. He still looked as if a dose of *Cal-Bis-Nate* would do him good. "Well, Pat," he said with an effort, "how are things?" They exchanged a few trivialities, and soon he said good-bye.

"Fun and games, eh?" said Patricia, when she and Gail were alone in the flat.

Gail was silent.

"Oh!" said Pat. "Just like that, eh? As well I came back early then. Boy Jim wasn't feeling so good, so we cut out dancing."

"Oh, I could have protected myself!" said Gail.

"Yeah . . . but did you want to?"

"I certainly did! You just arrived in time to stop me from hurting him!"

"That how you feel about him! Well, you should know best what's good for you. But I've known Monty Du Parc for years, and he's a bitch of an enemy to have!"

"You're telling me, Pat! But I never pretended to be wise."

II

About a fortnight later three of the four powerful heads of Fizz were gathered in the managerial offices of the Parthenope Theatre, which have windows opening on to the terrace with the floodlights just over the portico. This morning a hot May sun poured through them, making a stuffy furnace of the cigar-clouded atmosphere; across the Strand the roofs and chimney-pots were as if cut in dark cardboard against the hollow blue; and on a blank wall opposite, an enormous poster, bearing the figure of a woman in a long evening gown and sandals below a frieze of mixed musical notes, shone in fresh colouring and print. "IN MODERN MOOD, a *Musical Extravaganza*," it announced. "*Book and Music by Peter Warner*."

"Well, what's wrong?" demanded Arthur Inman impatiently; he had been called away from rehearsal on the stage to this unexpected conference.

"Nay, nothing's *wrong*, Arthur!" cooed Forshaw. "Only Grigori here"—he indicated Zharkov with the stump of his cigar—"doesn't like the score—mooch."

"Why, what's the matter with the score?" asked Inman contemptuously. "If I know anything it'll make a tremendous impression. It's something original."

"I agree," said Bob. "It's caught the mood of the moment, looking back to t'good old days with sadness, and forward with fear! . . . Brittle joys . . . passing luvs . . . all in a sigh, laike!"

"It is not musicianly," growled Zharkov.

"Well, I don't know anything about that," grunted Inman. "But I do claim to know something about the public taste in musicals, and I say they're going to eat it up."

Zharkov got angrily out of his chair. "I think you are both mad," he declared. "Mark my word, you are in for a flop with this show! The music is crazy——"

"So's the age!" said Forshaw. "Fiddlin' and jazzin' while thunder-cloud hangs over us!"

"My dear Bob," said Zharkov condescendingly, "you don't understand; public taste has improved, with the radio and all these concerts. The people vill not stand for this stuff of your Peter Warner, not even if I were to conduct it myself!"

"You don't mean to, do you, Grigori?" asked Inman in alarm.

"Certainly not! I have better things to do. I am founding a Symphony Orchestra of my own for a big season at the Albert Hall."

"Ee, but that's grand, Grigori!" said Forshaw, with a too-reassuring smile. "Your own compositions, I suppose?"

"Naturally! Do you think I am risking my money to popularize the works of other men?"

"We always thought," said Inman, "that you took such a close interest in the work of other composers!"

"Yes; when they are good! Not trash like this Peter Warner's! I offered to help him with this score. . . . I! . . . He told me he had nothing to learn from me! We are going to lose our money on this show! This it is to have to work with men who understand not a thing about music! At Kiev or at Riga or at Vilna in the Opera House, no, they would not endure such a thing!"

"Eh, poor Grigori!" said Forshaw sympathetically. "What a lot you lost by comin' to England, didn't you?"

"You vill see!" declared Zharkov, and moved towards the door.

"Don't forget you're lunching with me, Grigori!" Forshaw reminded him.

Zharkov turned round. "Where?" he asked.

"At the Turin."

"I thought you were angry with them," said Zharkov.

"So I am. That's joost why we're lunchin' there to-day! Meet me at one, and we'll go across together."

Zharkov gave a sulky nod and disappeared.

"What's it all about?" asked Inman.

Forshaw winked at him. "Eh, we always have this d——d fuss about a week or two before any show that we don't allow Grigori to sign all t'music for! Yon Peter Warner's an independent cockerel, like, and he's noan allowin' Mr Zharkov to crow on his perch. . . . Tell me, Arthur, how's t'show goin'? . . . Nicely? . . . Dost think we have a winner? . . . Ee! I'd luv to see a rehearsal."

Inman made a movement of irritation. "And we always have this argument, too, don't we, about a fortnight before every show? But you know my rule, Bob. You'll come to the first of the dress rehearsals."

"I only wanted to know how Bobo Baggaley was shapin'," pleaded Forshaw.

"That creature! It shows what comes of letting you in to rehearsals!

If I hadn't broken my rule at Blackpool and let you come snooping around, I wouldn't have had her to-day sticking out of my production like a plate of tripe at a Guildhall banquet!"

Forshaw rubbed the soft tip of his lobster-claw nose. "Nay now, Arthur," he said craftily. "I think you show less than your usual acumen there!"

"Really?"

"Ay, I do, Arthur! I believe that lass has something public will like."

"The Blackpool public or the West End public?"

"Public in general! T'ordinary man, whether he comes to theatre in boiled shirt or no. They'll all appreciate Bobo; she has something she's not afraid to show!"

"If I'd let her!"

Forshaw could not help grinning. "It's a thing we must take account of, Arthur," he said, "however high-brow we may be."

"Who says I'm a high-brow? There's nothing Bloomsbury about me! But you don't have to be a high-brow to detest a tawdry, flash, coarse, common little broad——"

"Nay now, Arthur, howd thy hush!" growled Forshaw malevolently.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Bob. I was only referring, of course, to your friend's professional personality. Off-stage she may be as charming and refined as you say. I wouldn't know."

"It's her professional personality we're speaking of," insisted Forshaw. "And she's got something different . . . vital! . . . Wasna there an old-time music-hall favourite they called 't'vital spark'? That's Bobo Baggailey! She's worth a dozen Gail Dariens. Ay, she's unique—a gran' little bitch, and we ought to give her more to do in t'show."

"Over my dead body!" Inman's chin jutted out.

"Nay, nay, dunnot excite thyself, Arthur! I have but said my say."

"And I've said mine. The public will decide which of us is right on the first night."

"Happen you'll come round to my point of view then!" asserted Forshaw.

"I must be off to lunch," said Inman.

"Ay, and so must I." He lifted the house telephone and asked for a number. "Is that you, Joe?" he enquired after a minute. "Art ready, lad? Grigori and I are just off to Turin. . . . You follow after as we arranged!"

The cause of Mr Forshaw's annoyance with that celebrated and exclusive West End restaurant the Turin was that, in the absence for a few days of his favourite waiter, his usual reserved table had been given to another party by a new-comer to the staff; and that Ernesto,

the *maitre d'hôtel*, had not seemed to think it worth making all that fuss about the mistake. To-day, as Forshaw entered the long room with Zharkov at his heels, he found himself met again by the strange waiter who had so unceremoniously bundled him out of the place of his predilection last week. He did not recognize Forshaw, but Forshaw recognized him, a tall, handsome young Italian with a severe manner, who had been a corporal in his country's army.

"Not there, please!" he had the impudence to say again, warding the Chairman of Fizz off from his favourite seat once more. "This table, if you please!"

Forshaw's face at once assumed an appearance of bovine vacuity. "Dunnot be hard on us, Mister," he pleaded. "We're nobbut two plain lads fro' Huddersfield wantin' soommat to eat. We'st sit where we're tow'd. . . . Coom on, Josiah!" It must be confessed that Zharkov answered very ill to his description and to the new name conferred so suddenly upon him. However, he followed Forshaw with a sardonic grin to the table allotted to them.

"Now, lad," said Forshaw, as soon as they were seated. "Say what tha' hast to gie us to eat!"

The waiter, standing like a ramrod behind his chair, presented the *carte du jour*, which Forshaw stared at in stupefaction. "Nay," he murmured, "I conna reetly make out these names!" He scratched his head, and then timidly pointing to an item on the card, "What about some o' that?" he asked. "Wi nice chips?" he added hopefully.

The waiter inclined slightly, to follow Forshaw's finger. Then he shook his head. "You cannot have that!" he pronounced with a supercilious smile.

"Nay, why not?" complained Forshaw. "'Tis on bill!"

"You cannot have that, sare!" repeated the waiter. "The band are playing it!"

"Band? What band?" asked Forshaw bewilderedly.

The Italian lost a little of his admirable, marmorean calm. "*O Sole Mio!*" he vociferated. "Eet is not fish, eet is musique! *This!*"—he twitched the card round in Forshaw's hand—"this is the menu!"

"Nay, now I see!" said Forshaw. "Ee! but this side is as hard to read as t'other! Listen, lad! I tow'd thee we were nobbut two plain boys fro' Huddersfield. Canst not gie us nice plate o' stewed tripe?"

The waiter shivered and drew himself up. He really did look as terrible as a Roman Emperor in that moment.

"We do not serve *tripes* at the Torino!" he said.

"No tripe!" ejaculated Forshaw, equally shocked. "Big place like this an' no tripe! Dost hear, Josiah? . . . Well, happen tha' canst send out for two plates? Here's t'brass, and sixpence for thee!"

The waiter rejected the coins with a sneer worthy of Tiberius. "We do *not* send out for things, sare!" he declared, and then, pouncing upon Zharkov, "No pipe-smoking, sare!" he said. "Put out that pipe,

please!" Zharkov had drawn from his pocket a large china pipe with a bowl shaped like the head of a Polish lancer, and was shooting clouds of black smoke across the splendid restaurant.

But before the Italian could wrest this defiling instrument from Zharkov's grasp, a loud voice behind him shouted, "Waiter-r-r! Bring vinegar bottle, and look slippy, dost hear?" He wheeled round outraged, and beheld . . . and beheld! . . . sitting at one of the dainty tables of the Turin with its shining napery and crystal, a large man with a violently checked suit and a red tie, eating fish and chips out of a newspaper! The people at the neighbouring tables were staring.

"*Corpo di Bacco!*" gasped the waiter, and prepared to launch himself upon the intruder. But at that moment Ernesto, the *maitre d'hôtel*, bustled up and enquired what was happening.

"*Ho visto un tipaccio che mangiara del pesce a quel tavola-là!*" exclaimed the young Emperor in a frenzy.

Ernesto followed his gestures; but the table was unoccupied, Joe Tucker having vanished through a side-door of the restaurant as mysteriously as he had arrived, to jump into a taxi waiting in a by-street outside.

"*Basta!*" said Ernesto angrily. "*Va a servire il signore e la signora laggiù!*" . . . Mr Forshaw, why have they not given you your proper table? . . . Please, this way!" and he personally installed Forshaw and Zharkov in their accustomed place.

"Where is Monty?" asked Zharkov when they had ordered their lunch—this time with the seriousness the subject deserved.

"He should be here soon," replied Forshaw. "He's been doing a bit of ferreting for me."

"Did you know that he is 'out' with our leading lady?" enquired Zharkov, his fishy eyes glimmering with a spark of malice.

"Eh! I never thought it would last long! Monty changes so quick he hardly ever remembers her name when he looks at her in the morning."

"But this was serious, you know. He wanted to marry Gail, as soon as her divorce was given."

"Monty marry?"

"Why not? He believes she will be a great star. Why should not he be her agent . . . her manager? . . . It would have been very good business for Monty!"

Forshaw rubbed his nose. "And bad for us! . . . But you say it's off?"

"Yes. They have quarrelled, and she has given him the brush-off." He sniggered. "Hard cheese for Monty after waiting so long and behaving so carefully, so as not to spoil the divorce!"

"He'll be reet mad with her," reflected Forshaw. "Ah! Here he comes!" Monty was edging through the crowded restaurant, exchanging smiles and handshakes among the tables as he came.

"Well," he said, bending over and speaking in a low voice to Forshaw as he seated himself. "I've got the dope about that business."

"What's t'game?" demanded Forshaw, his eyes steely behind his glasses.

"An awkward one for us, I'm afraid," said Monty, and proceeded to order his lunch with deliberation.

"Well, man, tell us!" said Forshaw exasperatedly as the waiter went away. "Hast got tongue in thy head?"

"It took me a long while to find it out," said Monty tantalizingly. "But, my word, it's been worth the trouble. . . . There's that red-headed wench from Paris, Grigori, do you see her? The one De Vigne brought over."

Forshaw screwed his head round in the direction Monty was looking. "Girl from Paris, eh, Monty?" he asked with a malicious curve of his thin lips. "'Tis Nancy Burnett fro' Blackburn, an old chorus girl of mine, married fellow in t'City. Ee, lad! You know too much always!"

"We're not looking at the same girl, obviously!" said Monty in a vexed tone. "What I'm trying to get you to listen to, Bob, is this! Isidore Raymond and José Miramar are undoubtedly going to join up with Jack Dunne and Maxse."

"Ay, I heard as much," said Forshaw. "The —s!" If such a group came into existence, it would amount to a direct challenge to Fizz for control of the London theatre.

"Well, the man who's found the bulk of the capital," continued Monty, "is—Zaleski! Maxse let it out to his girl-friend, who told Mary Derwent, whom I met at supper at the Colonna last night. If this syndicate is formed, Zaleski will control it. You know what that means."

Apparently Forshaw did, for he looked bleak, while Zharkov laid down his knife and fork and glowered at his plate. Monty, looking from one to the other, seemed to eat his chicken *en casserole* stewed in wine with added relish.

"He's such a consistent little swine!" he remarked. "First he gets control of Golden Palaces, to hold us to ransom; then he jockeys you out of Purple Halls last autumn, Bob; then through this new combination he gets the Duke's! Tell me, how does he do it?" added Monty contemptuously. "A wretched little worm who can't even speak English!"

"Happen he's not got Parthenope, yet!" said Forshaw, and buried his crooked nose in his tankard.

"No!" Monty used a toothpick for the flash of a second. "But we'll have to hold tight to it! Granted this show's a success——"

"We mun make it one!" declared Forshaw. "Ee! I wish I could make Inman see what could be done wi' that lass Bobo!"

"Bobo Baggaley?" murmured Monty. "Yes, we could build her up more than we do."

"She wants a good dance," suggested Zharkov. "*Style bouffon!*"

"Eh!" said Forshaw wearily. "You'll never get Peter Warner to write in a dance for Bobo?"

"Then why should not I?" demanded Zharkov.

The other two partners looked at him doubtfully.

"You think," said Zharkov angrily, "that I can only compose in the grand style, the classical! But you are wrong, my friends! I am very humorous; I have studied the music of the ballet, the *divertissement!*"

"We'll have Peter Warner walkin' out on us if we're not careful!" said Forshaw.

"I should let him go!" said Monty. "He's done his work, as well as he can do it, and now he tends to be a bit of a nuisance . . . at least, I find him so. One gets sick of Gail Darien morning, noon, and night!"

A fleeting grimace passed over Forshaw's face, and Monty flushed on his cheekbones. "I don't know what amuses you," he said; "but that's my feeling."

Forshaw turned to Zharkov. "When can we have your dance, Grigori?"

Zharkov shrugged his shoulders and rolled his tongue round his mouth. "You can give me two days?"

"Certainly!" said Forshaw, "and if Warner and Inman don't laike it, they can——" His eyes roamed viciously round the table as if in search of words sufficiently blistering.

"Look, Bob!" suggested Monty silkily, "I'm really getting into swing now with the publicity for the show; we must go all out to sell it to the public. Hitherto I've taken it for granted that Gail Darien was the story; but after what you've said, perhaps I ought slightly to vary the angle? Make the most of Gail, of course, that goes without saying; but also give little Bobo a bit of a build-up. What?"

Forshaw again gave one of his smiles of inscrutable amusement. "I'll leave that in your hands, absolutely, Monty. You understand what I want—get crackin' on it!"

The next minute, with a murmur of "Must be at St. Andrew's at two-fifteen!" the Chairman had vanished through the same side-door that had facilitated Joe Tucker's flight. Zharkov, who was telling an anecdote to Monty, did not notice his disappearance until the young Emperor laid the bill for all three lunches before him. Zharkov looked up and exploded in fury. "This is how it always is!" he complained. "It is not my turn to pay—no!"

"Very simple, isn't it?" laughed Monty, taking the plate with the bill on it from him. He drew his gold pencil-case from his vest-pocket and wrote on the bottom of the bill, "Bob Forshaw, p.p." The chastened Tiberius accepted it without cavil.

IV

When Peter Warner returned to Chelsea that evening, after watching the rehearsal at the Parthenope all the afternoon, he felt depressed. He knew that shows would get into this seemingly hopeless condition during rehearsal, and that they got out of it again; but really to-day nothing had gone right. Inman seemed more irritable than was his usual state, and seemed to pick on Gail especially, who at last lost her nerve and answered him back. Then Larry Milner, the star comic, seemed out of sorts and dissatisfied with his material. He kept using a throat-spray, too, which was a worrying symptom, because everybody knew that his throat was the weak point of this fascinating humorist with the sudden, piercing touches of pathos; and also that he sometimes made it an excuse when he did not like his part as given him. Besides these disagreeable features of the afternoon, a lot more time than was necessary had been wasted (in Peter's opinion) over a dialogue between Bobo Baggailey and a stooge in the stalls. As author he had only agreed to this scene being introduced under grumbling protest, and Inman had agreed with him. He could not understand why suddenly the producer had altered his attitude towards Bobo to one of sulky complaisance—almost as if he were afraid of the wench!

After dining in a small Chelsea restaurant, Peter went back to his flat, determined to drive away his glooms with work. He had hardly opened the piano when the telephone bell rang. "Is that you, Warner?" said a thick voice which he recognized with distaste as Zharkov's. "Are you busy this evening? . . . May I come round and see you for half an hour, later? . . . Thanks! I have somebody to see here first, and then I vill come as soon as I can."

Peter laid down the receiver with a sigh. It had been impossible, however, to refuse. He collected some ruled music paper and a pencil, and sat down at the piano. Immediately the front-door bell rang.

"Oh, God!" he said, and ran downstairs to open the door. He was unprepared for the shock awaiting him. On the step stood Beryl. He stared at her, astounded.

"Not pleased to see me, eh?" she remarked, returning his look.

Swiftly he decided, opened the door wide, and kissed her as she stepped in.

"You're never to say that, Ber," he told her. "I shall always be glad to see you—whatever you have done!"

"Heavens!" she answered, following him upstairs. "I might have had a criminal career!"

"What's the use of that line of talk, Beryl?" he asked, as they entered his room. "We've got to be frank with one another if we're ever to be friends again. At one time I believed I never would forgive

you; but the sight of you, suddenly like this, has been too much for me! But you know what I think of your behaviour at Blackpool. I don't take back a word of what I wrote to you at the time!"

"Still fighting Gail's battles, then? Where has it got you?"

"I don't look for dividends in friendship, my dear."

"Or in love, it appears."

"That doesn't arise!"

"What a lie! But have it your own way. I don't know whether what I'm here to tell you will be good news to you or not, but I'm through with Derek Vortigern."

"So soon?"

"Well, it may seem a short time to you! But just try living with a person who thinks only of himself from morning till night . . . and night till morning! You'll feel old!"

"You tried to justify what you did, Beryl," said Peter, "by telling me you were sure you could make all the difference to Derek's life. You would encourage him to work, pull him out of his laziness and self-pity, make another man of him, in short! That was the excuse you made for breaking up Gail's marriage and nearly destroying her career. And now, after less than a year, you come here and say you've given up!"

"I've given up because I made a bad bet, that's all. No woman on earth could make anything of that little lump of vanity and feebleness!"

"Derek never struck me as exactly feeble, Beryl," said Peter.

"You don't know him as I do. . . . Anyhow, I'm not sacrificing myself to his ego any more. . . . You tell me Gail was all broken up at losing him. She must be a very different sort of woman from me."

"Yes, she has a heart," said Peter quietly.

"Loud applause from the gallery at the Elephant!" murmured Beryl.

"Did you leave Derek, or did he leave you?" enquired Peter.

"I walked out on him, and thankful to be free of it! . . . D'you suppose Gail will take him back, if he asks?"

"I'm very sure she won't. Last autumn, perhaps! . . . To-day she's had time to think."

"I don't see why you need look so grim about it, Peter! If you care for Gail as much as you pretend, you can't wish Derek back on to her!"

The front-door bell rang, and Peter's face changed. "I say, Beryl," he explained, "it's very awkward, but that's Zharkov, I'm afraid. He's come by appointment. . . . I didn't, of course, dream you'd be here—"

"Well, what's all the fuss about?" she asked. "I haven't met Grigori for Lord knows how long. It'll be fun to see him again."

Peter shrugged and went downstairs to admit the *maestro*. "My

sister's paid me an unexpected call, Zharkov," he mumbled as he led him up to his rooms; "she's just off."

"Oh, but I hope not!" grinned the Russian, and as he entered the living-room, "My dear Beryl!" he exclaimed, "it is ages, yes . . . ach-es . . . since I have seen you! How do you do? Where have you been hiding all this time?"

"Oh, I've been going places," answered Beryl coolly. "Nice to see you again, Grigori. I believe you've got slimmer."

Zharkov purred. "Always a flatterer . . . eh, Peter . . . your sister?"

"Is she?" Peter smiled faintly. "Did you come on business, Mr Zharkov?"

Beryl rose slowly and gathered up her things. Zharkov watched her easy movements, like those of some lithe animal, with gleaming eyes. "I know Peter," she explained to him. "He won't do a stroke of work while I'm around."

Peter mumbled something vague, while pretending to rearrange the music on the piano.

"Well, good-night," said Beryl. "I hope you'll come and see me one day, Peter. I've got my old mews back off the Old Brompton Road."

"So you are back there!" said Zharkov quickly. "Number 14C Ventnor Mews, isn't it . . . no?"

"Clever of you to remember, Grigori," answered Beryl. "Yes, that's where I'm parked again for the present."

"You are on the phone?" enquired Zharkov.

She gave him her number; then, "Don't trouble to come down, Peter!" she said.

Left alone with Zharkov, Peter invited him to take an arm-chair and offered him the cigarettes. "What can I do for you?" he enquired. "I hope, frankly, you haven't come to ask me again to recast the principal numbers of the show, because, right or wrong, my mind's made up about that."

"Not exactly!" Zharkov attempted a propitiatory smile with his huge white teeth. "Though, mind you, I think you are wrong! You have everything that a musician can want, my dear Warner, except one. The finish that experience alone can give!"

"Quite possibly," returned Peter. "But somehow I've a fancy for learning what experience can teach me all by myself."

Zharkov shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we aren't going to argue about that any more, though you would get to the top of the tree with expert help in half the time it would take you to climb there alone. You and I, Warner, we ought to be working together, not against one another! . . . Now this is the business. It has been agreed that I shall compose some extra numbers for Miss Bobo Baggailey in the show."

Peter sat up angrily in his chair. "I don't agree!" he declared. "It was understood that *In Modern Mood* was to be my show—words and music!"

"Oh, we have always the right to put in extra numbers," answered Zharkov. "Now I vill tell you what I think. You wish the whole show to be in one style, don't you—your own? Perhaps we vork together, then? You have a tune in your head for Bobo's number, I am sure you have! Good! Then I vill harmonize it, and at the same time, if you like, run through your other numbers for you. What do you say? . . . Don't decide in a hurry! Take five minutes to think. It vill mean a lot to you whether you vork with me or against me in Fizz!"

Peter sat silent. He realized that the issues were formidable for him. He recalled how Monty Du Parc's conversation had once seemed to him like a brilliantly lit public subway, with no rest or shelter for the passenger who could not keep to the path and finish the journey. Something of the same feeling stole over him again here in his own comfortable room as he sat watching Zharkov, who had unobtrusively dropped the cigarette Peter had given him into a flower-vase, and was now smoking a long cigar he had extracted from his case while his host was not looking. Let him accept Zharkov's treaty, and he would gradually be bogged down in the morass of collaboration and slow subordination to Zharkov. He would be sure of a living because he would be too useful to be thrown away. Even when he became a Doherty—and he could imagine himself taking to drink in the end—he would receive a wage that would keep him from starving and afford him a sufficient number of whiskies.

On the other hand, let him refuse; let him tell this cosmopolitan blood-sucker to clear out and allow him to enjoy the fruits of his own brain . . . well, then he had made an enemy for life, an utterly unscrupulous and dishonourable enemy . . . But could you speak of "scruples" or "honour" in relation to Zharkov, who had never in his life had such ideas presented to him? . . . And this enemy would be high in the counsels of Fizz, ever ready to hamper, and, when the moment came, to annihilate him.

Peter felt himself perspiring, and pulled out his handkerchief to mop his forehead. Zharkov looked round enquiringly. "You find it hot in this room?" he asked. "Me—no!"

And suddenly Peter heard his own voice. "I'm afraid, Mr Zharkov," it said, "that arrangement would never work. . . . You see, my style's so different from yours—you a composer in the grand-opera manner, I just a maker of songs! . . . No! I'm terribly grateful for the honour and all that . . . but the answer is in the negative . . . definitely."

Zharkov sat in silence for a moment, and his bulk appeared, to Peter's sharpened fancy, to increase in size and massiveness; it was like a great rock poised across his route, ready at a touch to fall and

pulverize him. At last Zharkov ground out the stub of his cigar on the carpet, and heaving himself out of his chair looked round the room, covering the furniture, the pictures, the radio set, the scribble of manuscript music on the piano with the same brutal contempt. "S-s-shtupid!" he said sibilantly, and walked out without a further word.

Left to himself, Peter went over to his radio and sought for some programme of consoling music. He found it—oddly enough in Berlin—and as he stood smoking and hearing a Symphony Orchestra playing Beethoven, his spirits began to revive. . . . After all, why should he be frightened of Zharkov? Couldn't he stand on his own legs? . . . If he twiddled the knobs of his set persistently enough, he would probably find that somewhere in the world "The Park Nobody Knows" or "Castles in the Sand" was being played at this very moment! He had the people with him! Need he, then, be always so frightened of these business and managerial sharks? . . . True, they had stung him once, and badly, over the Melodeon contract. But unless he was a perfect fool, that need not happen again. After all, he could do without Melodeon or Fizz, the salesmen, at least as well as they could do without him—the creator!

And abruptly an audacious, an impish idea came to him, and he turned off the knobs of the radiogram. They wanted a number for Bobo Baggageley, the little baggage, did they? And they had gone to Zharkov for it! Where, in all the works of Verdi, Puccini, or Tchaikovsky, was he going to find for his purposes the cheeky, cockney, catchpenny piece of melody to fit Bobo?

What was wanted was something with the New Cut and Islington High Street and the Mile End Road all in it at once! Yes! Peter chuckled; he could see them at it—the girls linked arm-in-arm and swaying in a line from side to side of the street, the boys wagging their shoulders and walking with short, stiff steps. . . . That was the number for Bobo! . . . Already the piano was giving out little tinkles, as with his other hand he reached for more music-paper and for the indelible purple pencil he preferred for setting down notes . . . an unfortunate choice, since, as he always needed to delete the indelible at least six times, the paper at the finish would be drowned in an imperial haze, while the composer's fingers and mouth would look like those of a school-boy who has eaten too many plums.

It was well past midnight when Peter added to the confusion of music-sheets and pencils in which he had by now swearingly engulfed himself a sheaf of clean paper on which to write the words. As always in his hours of hottest inspiration, the rhymes had come prancing and jingling alongside the tune, and had now only to be harnessed carefully to it. But the muddle of versions soon became such as to make his head spin. Leaves fell unseen between his feet, to be trampled

into illegibility; others, with the graceful languor of ballerinas, slid off the music-stand on to his fingers as he strummed; one sheet (containing by far the best rendering of both the refrain and the words to it) slipped through the open lid into the works of the piano—irrecoverably. Peter had used up every bad word he knew, and wished his drummer-brother had taught him some more; but still he persevered, and at last the number for Bobo was finished—song as well as dance.

It was as well. The dawn was inquisitively thrusting fingers through the curtains, and an angry thumping on the ceiling was reminding Peter that the flat overhead was occupied—and not by music-lovers. But it was done, and with trembling fingers, on which ink had now been added to indelible purple pencil, Peter wrote the title on the first sheet—"My New Hat!"

He went down early to the rehearsal at the Parthenope; and finding that Inman had not yet arrived, ousted Doherty from the piano in the orchestra pit and played Bobo's new song through to her. She squealed for joy—believing Peter must have fallen for her, and not seeing in the tune anything different from the stuff she usually sang—and forthwith she ran to unearth Bob Forshaw. Covered with dust and in pink shirt-sleeves, he was burrowing under the stage in search of some hoops covered with artificial flowers which he had taken over in a pile of oddsments with the lease of the Parthenope and now wanted for one of his cheap revues.

He came up unwillingly as far as the orchestra pit, murmuring, "Ee! I saw those — hoops t'day I first came to look over t'theatre!" and consented to give ten minutes of his attention to the song that might be the making of his £30,000 production at the Parthenope.

But he had sense enough to realize that "My New Hat!" was likely to make a furore, and his eyes glistened behind his glasses. "Ay!" he admitted, "that's grand, Peter! Ee, this lad's a bobbydazzler! But I thought," he added, "that Zharkov was takin' this number in hand?"

"Well, I've done it first—that's all!" replied Peter, grinning on the piano stool like a lean Puck.

"I see," said Forshaw. "Grigori won't be pleased, I'm afraid; but we mun have it in at all costs! Happen 'twill be hit of show!"

"What will be the hit of the show . . . and who's going to sing it?" asked a voice from the stage above, and they all glanced up like conspirators to see Gail Darien, in a black costume relieved by touches of white, staring down at them with a severe look on her long face.

Forshaw was prompt with the answer. "We've been listenin' to the new song Peter's written for Bobo, dear! . . . You should hear it! . . . Ee, it's champion!"

"Really?" said Gail, lifting her eyebrows. "Congratulations, Bobo! What have you done to Peter?"

"Oh, he's my sweetest sweet!" replied Bobo, flinging her arm round his shoulder.

Peter felt too limp even to throw off her embrace. It must be recorded of this inept young man (so unfit to be the hero of anybody's story) that in his enthusiasm to create the perfect cockney song, he had not considered for a moment what Gail might think about the matter. At last he slid off the stool, and rushing out of the pit up on to the stage, sought for her in the wings, to make his offence worse by explanations and apologies!

Gail coldly cut him short. "What's the matter with you, Peter?" she demanded. "You don't really think, do you, that I'm jealous because Bobo's getting a break? . . . You could have told me, though!"

Peter retreated, still worse confounded, and came back gloomily to the footlights. He was experiencing to the full the reaction from his sleepless night, and felt that everything must be fated to turn out wrong on this unlucky day. Presently the sound of Doherty softly strumming on the piano in the pit below began to irritate him. "Couldn't you choose some other background music, Doherty?" he called.

The Irishman looked up with a pallid smile, and Chopin's Funeral March died away. "I ask your pardon," he said. "'Tis my brother's year's mind, and I was thinkin' of him. The Holy Mass was said for him this morning. . . . 'Tis the great dhrinker *he* was!" added Doherty reverently, gazing at the keys.

It was already late for the beginning of the rehearsal. The scene was filling with principals, chorus, ballet, and stage-hands, and through the crowd Forshaw, tall in his begrimed shirt-sleeves, moved to and fro, searching in all likely and unlikely corners for "t'hoops wi' t'flowers!" Suddenly out of the flies came a shrill voice. "Hi! You in the pink shirt! Don't mike about there doing nothing, but come up here and help roll this cloth!"

There was a paralysed silence among the bystanders as Forshaw slowly raised his head and peered into the flies. "Who," he asked with ferocious suavity, "was that doin' me the honour to address me?"

"Wha'?" said the voice. "Come up, can't you, when you're told!"

Forshaw took a step nearer to the side, where a lamp fell on his face. "Nay, lad, come down and see me!" he ordered.

There was a squeak aloft, and a sound like a mouse scurrying through a store cupboard to safety. By the time Reggie and other emissaries of Forshaw's wrath had reached the flies, Hughie was in Trafalgar Square. . . .

Suddenly the chatter everywhere was stilled. Inman, attended by Pallant, had come into the stalls. "Quiet, everybody!" said the stage-director superfluously. "Beginners Scene Three!"

But down in the orchestra pit all by himself Doherty, with the soft pedal on, was beginning Chopin's Funeral March again.

V

What Grigori Zharkov said to Bob Forshaw later that morning when at last he ran him down in a room high in the dome of the theatre is nobody's business. Immediate withdrawal of himself and his capital from Fizz and all its associated enterprises was the least he threatened in reprisal for the insult offered to him by the insertion of Peter's new song in place of the one he had meant to write himself.

"Ay, Grigori, but, you see, you haven't written it!" retorted Forshaw shrewdly, "and there was no time to wait!"

Zharkov went out of the little dome office slamming the door behind him; and while Forshaw went back with relief to writing a comedy sketch for an August pier show in the Isle of Man, he clattered down the stairs and into the vestibule of the theatre. Here he went into a room behind the box office and said to an accountant who was working there, "Get out! I am telephoning! . . . Is that you, Beryl?" he asked (in such a different voice) after dialling. "You will be in this afternoon? . . . Good! . . . Alone? . . . That is fine! Wait for me, my dear, will you? I awfully want to see you. I will be around about half-past two."

As his car happened to be under repair, he went by tube to South Kensington after lunch to save the expense of a taxi; and on his way to Beryl's mews, he paused outside a florist's, but shook his head at the prices and walked on. A little farther along, however, he came upon a street flower-seller, and bought a few tulips from her.

As he approached Beryl's door he heard her at the piano, and stood a little while outside, listening before he rang the bell. He was struck by the piece she was playing, and tried for a moment to guess who the composer might be. Then he rang, the piano stopped, and Beryl, in an embroidered Hungarian blouse, opened the door to him. Her face was very carefully made up.

"Beryl! . . . Beryl, my dear!" he said as soon as he was inside, "I am so very glad to see you again!" He extended both his fat hands, and as she held out hers readily to meet him, he drew her to him and kissed her. She acquiesced, but showed no answering ardour.

They went into the living-room in silence. "Cigarettes?" she asked, offering a Russian box of wood with a painted lid. "No? You prefer your dreadful cigars, I suppose."

"They are not dreadful cigars; they are Havanas!" he chuckled, while she put the flowers he had brought into a green pot with handles. "But," he added, pausing clipper in hand, "I will not smoke them in here if they leave a scent you dislike behind."

"I can open all the windows when you go," she retorted.

"But I don't know," he said slowly as he clipped and lit his cigar, "that I want you to open all the windows and get rid of me like that! I would say, rather, please remember me even after I have gone, Beryl!"

"Afraid I shall forget you?" she asked stingingly, leaning against the edge of a table with a yellow Russian cigarette in her fingers. "Our last talk was the sort that lingers fragrantly in the memory, don't you think?"

He made a deprecating gesture. "Time has passed since then. You have had a disappointment."

"Who told you that?" she snapped, her brown eyes flaming.

"Never mind! I hear. I too have been unhappy——"

"But not lonely—I hear!"

"I have been unhappy wanting you, Beryl!" he insisted. "You know why I cannot make you my wife——"

"We've been over all this ground before, Grigori, haven't we?"

"No, but listen! Listen, Beryl!" An irritable tic at the corner of his slab-like lips belied the tenderness of his tone. "Last time, you got me all wrong! I want *you* and I want you only . . . to live with me and be all my life. There is not, there never shall be, any other woman for me. I am done with that sort of thing! You had come to me when I asked last year, I had done with it then! I want to make a new home, in a flat I have been looking over in Saint John's Wood . . . very comfortable . . . very quiet. Quiet I must have, you see, because I have reached the age when I must develop my talents as an original composer or let them die! For that I must have peace; I must have a home that really is a home; I must have to inspire me the von woman I love!"

He paused, leaning forward in his chair with what he hoped was an ardent look; but he could not keep the wariness out of his cold eyes.

"I wonder how much of all that you really mean?" said Beryl at length, tossing her cigarette end into the grate.

"About my love of you? . . . Oh, Beryl!"

"No. About giving yourself to serious work as a composer."

"Composer and conductor—yes! Haven't you heard I am founding a Symphony Orchestra?"

"Yes, I heard that," she said in a gentler tone. "How I'd love to be your harpist, Grigori!"

He shook his head frowningly. "No, no! That would not do!"

She laughed at his racial obstinacy. "I was waiting for that," she told him. "What I really want to know is whether your musical ambition is to be more than—well, an intermezzo between a Board Meeting and a merger. I don't see myself sitting at home in a flat, however nice, waiting for you to dash in for a few minutes between

appointments." Her eyes suddenly kindled with a remembered resentment. "I don't enjoy love-making, Grigori, that's interrupted at the most passionate moment by the need to make telephone calls!"

He lifted his hands in protest. "That only happened once, Beryl, and it was a very urgent call I had forgotten, to Liverpool!"

"I don't care if it was to Hell!" she flared out. "It was d——d humiliating to me!"

"You will find everything is all right this time," he murmured, and began to feel in his pockets. Beryl heard something chink, and her brows drew together blackly. If he was going to offer her jewellery a second time . . . but surely even he could not be so obtuse? He was not.

What he drew from his pocket was a key with a label attached to it. "This is the key of the flat I spoke of, Beryl, in Saint John's Wood," he said. "I picked it up at the agents' on my way down to Town this morning. I wanted to look over the place again. I thought, perhaps, you might like to have a look at it with me, Beryl?"

She shook her head. "That's going a great deal too fast!" she told him.

"Will you not advise me how I shall furnish it? You have the most beautiful taste, I have observed!"

She looked round the converted carriage-house, with its bleak stone floor and scanty furnishings. "Not much chance of expressing one's taste in a hole like this!" she murmured. "You're devilish clever sometimes, Grigori. Who taught you that a woman may resist good looks, money, jewels, a title . . . but to forgo looking over a house and seeing what could be made of it, even though she hasn't the least idea of living in it . . . no, she's not strong enough for that, at least not when she's me! It's something to do, after all. I'll come, if you want me to."

"Good! I find a taxi!"

"You needn't! I'll ring for one." She went out into the tiny entrance-hall where the telephone hung, and when she had finished came back to find that Grigori had wandered over to the piano and had taken the music off the stand. "What is this?" he asked her as she came in.

"Something you've no business to see!" she answered, hurrying forward. "Give it to me, please!"

"It is all right." He surrendered it indifferently. "If you don't wish me to see it! But that is what you were playing when I came to the door, is it?"

"Suppose it was. What then?"

"Who is the composer?"

"Call yourself a musician, and not know who it is from the style!" she mocked him.

He knit his black brows. "I should know? . . . Could it be Haydn? . . . No, you would play that from a book!"

She laughed merrily. "Oh, Grigori! My brother never had such a compliment paid him! . . . Unless, of course, you're accusing him of a steal from the London Symphony!"

"Your brother—he composed *this* music?" Zharkov gaped, incredulous.

Beryl nodded. "It's from an unfinished *operette* he's composing. I shan't even tell you the name of it: it's his secret. I only happen to have this number and a couple of others, because he asked me to make a fair copy for him . . . oh, ages ago . . . and, like him, forgot to ask for them back. I turned them up in a drawer the other day."

While she talked she took the sheets from the piano and tied them into a portfolio. "I don't think it's quite Haydn!" she continued, "and I'm not sure I think better of your judgment for imagining it could be. But it's lovely! Especially that Prelude I was playing when you came! . . . There's the taxi outside! Just a minute while I put on some powder!"

She ran up the winding wooden stair to her bedroom. Zharkov listened till her footsteps were right over his head; then swiftly he untied the portfolio, and extracted the sheets headed "Prelude—*Orange Nell*" in pen and ink. These he crammed into his pocket, and when Beryl descended with her hat and gloves on, the portfolio was tied as she had left it, and Zharkov was waiting with seeming impatience near the door. "Come on, my dear!" he said. "It is a long way, and he vill already have run up half a crown on his meter!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

THE opening of *In Modern Mood* lay now only a few days ahead, and Inman was whipping the rehearsals up to a frenzy. After the hours of doubt and the debates of the early stages, a growing faith in the piece was taking hold of producer and cast alike.

It was certainly no new thing that a revue should draw its themes from the life of its day; but Peter Warner, nearly everyone felt, had brought the very spirit of modernity—the “modernity” of the 1930’s—into his music and into his book. Febrile, brittle, spurning sentiment yet sobbing inside its cynicism, taking pleasure with a sour face and calamity with a twisted smile, scoffing at the grandeurs of the past, yet sighing over a crinoline or a Viennese waltz, making New York its heaven, and driven by the rhythm of the negro like a madness in its blood, the age had been caught by Peter with tenderness and mockery. As for Inman, with an artistic whole to work upon, he had surpassed himself in colour and vitality. Moments of danger were scented here and there by the cautious—passages of music too “modern” to be melodious, dances that might raise a laugh if they failed to grip—but on the whole nobody doubted that here was a success.

The little guerrilla war of denigration that had at one time blown up against Gail—the star from the provinces trying to pass over the heads of her more experienced rivals—had also died away. As the work of preparation intensified, she seemed to gain in stature and understanding; if she had made her hit at Blackpool principally by beauty and a fine voice, at the Parthenope she showed herself able to make these gifts the servants of a personality; and in one or two scenes with a discreet dramatic or pathetic twist to them, she had startled even Inman by her acting. Above all, she had a perfect confidence in herself: she no longer believed she could put a foot wrong—the furnace she had passed through that opening night at the Palatine Gardens in Blackpool had burned nervousness out of her for good.

She was taking care of herself now, too. She went to no more all-night parties. She stopped taking Dr Swing’s pick-me-up, having found what it did to her the next day, and let Evie throw the bottle in the dust-bin. She gave up her riding for the time just in case of a mishap, and rested in bed in the mornings so as to come fresh to the steadily lengthening rehearsals. And it was while she was doing this on the Friday before the opening on the following Wednesday that Pat Worthington called to her through the doorway of the room where she was finishing her breakfast.

"There's oodles of advance stuff about your show in the papers this morning, darling!" she cried.

"Yes?" Gail put her coffee cup down on the tray. "What do they say?"

"I haven't had time to read them, dear; the dentist will be waiting for me. I'll tell Evie to bring them in to you. . . . Good-bye!"

As the front door slammed a minute or two later behind the wiry, indefatigable Patricia, Evie brought in the three papers they took between them and laid them on Gail's bed. She picked up the *Daily Courier* first.

It had a half-column, nearly, of gossip about the forthcoming musical at the Parthenope, which would be, it said, the first full-length work of Peter ("Lytham Rhythm") Warner, who had done both words and music. There followed details of Peter's career and achievements which would make pleasant reading for him and for his friends—though the remark that the show would contain "additional numbers by Grigori Zharkov" was calculated, Gail knew, to give him much less pleasure! The writer went on to state that *In Modern Mood* was an "Arthur Inman production," that over £30,000 had been spent on it; and that a new lighting system had been installed at the Parthenope to cope with it. "What," observed the gossip-writer, fluttering lightly for a moment into history, "what would David Kean have thought of it?" Finally he—she?—observed that a "phenomenal cast" had been got together, headed by Larry Milner, "the clown with a tear in his voice" . . . and . . . well, that was that!

Gail dropped the paper, feeling cold in spite of the sunshine streaming through her half-drawn blinds. She took up a second daily, which had a reputation for specializing in theatre news, and was rewarded by finding an "interview" with Bob Forshaw himself.

The Chairman of Fizz showed an inspiring confidence in his coming venture. "I," he said, "am giving something new in stage production." "I," he went on, "have sought to create scenes of a characteristically 'modern' beauty." "I," he claimed, "have combed Europe and America for acts of novelty and grace." "I," he promised, "have personally selected a chorus that I hope will be found easy on the eye." Mr Forshaw acknowledged the "invaluable assistance, as always, of my partner, Arthur Inman," of Léonie Valterra, who had arranged the dances, and of "Alpha," who had designed the *décor*. He then ran through the "tried favourites" and the "new-comers to London," including Zamek, the Czech violinist, Frank Doble, "the English Fred Astaire," and Saul's swing-band, who were in the cast; and here Gail found that at least she had her place in the list as "a new soprano of unusual brilliance and charm." But the interview concluded:

"'We shall also,' said Mr Forshaw, 'be introducing another talented young artiste to the West End public. This is Bobo Baggailey, who was such a smash-hit in our summer show last year at Blackpool, and

whom I confidently expect to repeat her triumph at the Parthenope. If Marie Lloyd has a successor in the theatre to-day, she is, in my opinion, to be found in this brilliant girl."

Gail let the paper fall on the coverlet with a shrug. Then with a jerk she unfolded the *Morning Gazette* and turned to Athelstan Rigglesworth's "Diary." Here, under the side-head "Personality Bomb," she read:

"Supping at the Colonna last night, I saw Fizz's latest starlet, eighteen-year-old Bobo Baggaley"—"Eighteen! Good for you, Bobo!" murmured Gail. "This red-haired, twinkling piece of vivacity, singer, dancer, mimic, with a style very much her own, is likely to be a bright spot in Bob Forshaw's new £30,000 musical *In Modern Mood* at the Parthenope on Wednesday next.

"Bob tells me he has been waiting to put the show on for years, but just couldn't find the girl who would be right for this part. Now, he believes, he has succeeded, and I, too, am putting my money on Bobo Baggaley. Last year, at Blackpool, this clever girl appeared in Fizz's big summer season revue, although only in a minor part. Good judges had no doubts as to who had stolen the show."

"*Et tu B-rute!*" said Gail aloud to the foot of her bed. "But we shall meet to-night in the foyer," she reflected.

II

The idea of giving a party in the famous Regency foyer of the Parthenope as an informal send-off to Fizz's opening there had been put up to Forshaw by Monty Du Parc and warmly welcomed by him. The invitations, bearing the stimulating legend, "Buffet Supper, 10.30—12," had gone out to everybody who could be of the least use to the hosts, and on the evening of the day that had seen the fruits of Monty's and Athelstan's Press campaign, a large throng stirred and laughed in the long room facing the river, with its fluted pilasters and frieze of plaster garlands. From niches in the walls the effigies of eighteenth-century actors in periwigs and of the contemporaries of Edmund Kean in romantically ruffled locks looked down with the smiles or frowns of demigods upon the quicksilver mob of modern elegants as it eddied round their stone buskins.

Gail, when she arrived soon after half-past ten, found nearly everybody she knew there—the society hostesses to whose parties she had been asked, half the theatre world, jockeys, journalists, solid fragments of the City. All seemed happy and excited, except the professionals—columnists and photographers—to whom the affair was just one more job of work at the end of a long, hot day, and Gail was soon encircled by young women of fashion (who hoped to find out how she made her hair look like that), by eager male admirers, and by two

pertinacious camera men who wanted to get her in a group with Lady Y—

Perhaps the only thoroughly gloomy face that passed through the throng belonged to the composer of the piece they had come to give this gay send-off to. Peter had read the paragraphs that Gail had seen in bed this morning—and several others she had fortunately not seen, though there were dear professional friends hovering around now anxious to mention them to her. He knew enough of journalism to realize that this peculiar welcome to the new leading lady of a forthcoming West End show could only have originated in one place—Monty Du Parc's office—and he was determined at the first opportunity to have it out with the man he had so long believed to be a friend. But before he could get a glimpse of Monty he ran into the tall Chairman of Fizz. "Evenin', Mr Accompanist!" grinned Forshaw. "I hope you made sure your supper was included in your agreement?"

"What's the gag, Bob?" asked Peter, pulling nervously at his white waistcoat—he was always horribly uncomfortable in full evening dress.

"Aren't you goin' to play for us? . . . I've had t'piano brought along from Green Room, and I'm allowin' Gail to give 'em a cocktail, just a couple of her songs from show, to give 'em an appetite laiike, and set 'em talkin'."

"Oh, I didn't know," said Peter. "Of course, I'll play for her, if she wants me to."

"Good lad! An' afterwards we'll have Bobo give 'em a verse or two of 'My New Hat!' That'll send 'em away whistlin'!"

Peter acquiesced dejectedly. How he wished now he'd never composed that d—d song! Then he caught sight of Gail, just turning aside from a group near the staircase and coming with her floating walk across the gold-wreathed, purple carpet. He intercepted her and drew her into an embrasure of the long windows. "Gail," he asked, "what are we going to do about this beastly thing—these Press notices?"

"Nothing at all, Peter!" she answered.

"But they can't do this to you, Gail!" he said vehemently. "I mean to see Monty and have it out with him! He's been behaving in the queerest way ever since I came back from France, as if he were trying to avoid me. Now he's just got to tell me what it's all about . . . and put right what he's done this morning!"

"Please, Peter, no!" Gail laid a hand for a moment on his sleeve. It seemed to him that her face had suddenly gone haggard. He gazed at her in distress, painfully struck by the signs she had for some time past been showing of assimilation to her surroundings. He recalled the days when—so fresh in all her artifice—she used to appear to him as a visitant from another sphere. Now, in this ambiguous assemblage of

horn-rimmed men with prevaillingly dark hair and sallow complexions, and slim women with lustrous coiffures setting off strained expressions, she seemed to belong only too well. Her thin face was thinner, her large eyes larger, yet at the same time shallower, as though a tawny screen had been set just behind the pupils.

"Don't start anything, Peter!" he heard her pleading. "Monty's not to blame. He hands out his stuff . . . he can't prevent the papers from giving it their own slant. I—I can't afford to quarrel with him."

"Oh, well," murmured Peter, stepping back. "If you defend him——" He gave her a look of such piercing sadness that she turned her head away to gaze through the uncurtained windows at the lamps of the temporary Waterloo Bridge throwing their misty haloes across the river. Then one of the black-haired men came up and asked her to the buffet with him, and Peter left her.

Would he ever, he thought numbly, as he wandered, with an unlighted cigarette in his fingers, through the unattractive throng, fathom the secret of her relations with Monty Du Parc? The look with which she had turned away from him just now had been the very replica of the one with which she had met him at their last meeting on Blackpool sands—a look of defiance with shame in it. . . . But then?

Although he never mixed in backstage gossip, hating it and believing quite half of it to be lies, he had, since his return to England, been unable to avoid overhearing Gail's name mentioned occasionally with a leer and a sneer in connection with Fizz's youngest, most go-getting director. But he had been all the less disposed to follow up such hints, since from the very day almost of his arrival in London the hostile frigidity between her and Monty Du Parc had been obvious to him—culminating in these Press notices, which, he was convinced, were a feline stroke of Monty's against the leading lady.

So what? They had quarrelled now . . . but what had preceded the quarrel? An ugly idea stabbed Peter and filled him for a moment with a blind fury of jealousy. Then he asked himself miserably by what right he presumed to be jealous . . . and then he found that, without noticing where he was going, he had come up against the buffet and a group of people listening to Athelstan Rigglesworth (the only guest present not in evening dress), who with a glass of champagne in one hand and his usual mashed cigar end in the other, was pontificating at the full pitch of his growling voice. It occurred to Peter that since Gail had not forbidden him to seek explanations from Athelstan, it might be wise to wait and tactfully sound the critic afterwards upon the motives of his attack upon Gail.

Athelstan at the moment was commenting upon another recent Press sensation, a slashing article on the critics in a Sunday paper by Sir Edward Bonnersley, the Shakespearean knight, whose Hamlet Athelstan Rigglesworth had brutally scoffed at in the *Morning Gazette* the week before.

"Yes," drawled Athelstan, "of course, I read Bonnersley's stuff. He ought to have put his head in the frig before he sat down to write such rubbish! No, it doesn't worry me, because," he grinned sourly, "I'm enough of a Christian to forgive my enemies. In fact, I like 'em. They keep me up to the mark! If anyone in the theatre is pleased with what I write, it means nine times out of ten that I've fallen down on my job, which is to tell the unpalatable truth. So I welcome all the abuse of myself and my trade, whether it's Bonnersley's latest ridiculous rigmarole, or the saying of that bilious Jew-boy years ago who called the critics 'the men who have failed in literature and art.'"

"Oh, but Athelstan," said a voice from the edge of the circle in crisp and clear diction, "that surely isn't fair! You haven't failed in *art*, yet, have you?"

Everybody turned their heads, to see Gail Darien in her pale-blue gown, a cigarette between her lips, smiling suavely on the critic. There was a hush in which the sound of a cocktail shaker behind the buffet was like a clash of cymbals. Athelstan Rigglesworth's pale face had turned white as paper; his eyes glared at Gail with an expression that made her all in a moment sorry for her allusion to the catastrophe of his poetic drama. She had not understood until that moment what agony a diseased vanity can cause its victim.

Athelstan licked his lips; then said in a husky voice, "So long as I don't fail in honesty, Miss Darien, I'm quite satisfied, thank you!" Then he turned his back and walked in a dead silence to the buffet, where he stood with shaking hands and jerking shoulders, looking about for a waiter.

The little group began to disperse, with whispers and giggles, to spread, and embroider, the episode. Peter alone remained where he stood, feeling as if the rich ceiling of the foyer had crashed in upon him. Had Gail gone completely mad to do such a thing at such a moment? . . . Yes, she must be mad! He still wondered if he could have heard her properly!

The next minute he heard Bob Forshaw's voice lifted above the hubbub to make a little speech of welcome to his guests, and to announce that, "I have asked Miss Gail Darien kindly to give us the pleasure of hearing her sing one of her songs from our new show, 'Blues—I don't know why!'"

There was a murmur of surprise and pleasure, amid which Peter, beckoned by an imperious gesture from Gail, made his way over to the piano, and opened it. As he sat down he could not help asking, "Gail, what on earth made you do it?"

"Don't worry, Peter!" she answered with a curl of her lip that seemed to him to convey scorn for his agitation. "Athelstan Rigglesworth and I have to fight this out between us!"

Peter wondered if she understood that it was a case of a nutshell craft attacking a battleship with all its guns, but there was nothing

he could say. So he bent over the piano and struck a chord or two before beginning the song. Silence fell on the length of the foyer, and there was not even a clink of glasses from behind the buffet as Gail's voice came levelly out, and then, without effort, soared to the frieze of the classic, self-assured Regency saloon.

*"Blues—I don't know why,
Since we're together, you and I!
And yet I cannot choose,
All music turns to Blues!"*

III

"Half an hour, please!" Peter heard five nights later as, after a glance at Gail's great limousine outside the stage-door, he passed the hall-keeper with a nod; and made his way, through knots of men, across the huge stage, set for the first scene of his *revue*, to wish Gail luck in her dressing-room. On the farther side he smiled at Joe Tucker, ready made-up for the first scene, and was warmly greeted by Hughie, who was giving confused last-minute instructions to the electrician and three of his men. "Evening, Mr Warner!" he exclaimed. "Big winner again this time—wha'?" He stepped back with a nod and a smile, and went spinning over the foot of a pageant lamp set to illuminate an arch. It was put out of action, and the electricians had ten minutes of feverish toil to connect it up again. They gave Hughie affectionate glances.

Meanwhile, Peter had passed on and knocked at Gail's door, where he was at once let in. It was a delicately panelled room, in a cream now yellowish with time, and had been the star's dressing-room since Malibran had sung, and Harriet Mellon (Duchess of St. Albans) and Mrs Keeley had played here when the Parthenope was young. As Peter entered, Gail was sitting at her ultra-modern dressing-table with its lights and oblong folding-mirrors, amid bouquets of roses and orchids, with a towel hiding her hair to keep the powder off while she made up. She turned to give him a smile as cheerful and serene as if there were no tremendous test awaiting her. He could not help contrasting her state this evening with the nightmare circumstances of the first night at Blackpool last year, and his face lightened a little as he sat down in a chair close to her table and watched her rubbing foundation colour over her face from a tube.

After a minute she sent Evie out of the room on some excuse, and glancing at Peter for a second while she put Mandarine-colour cream rouge on her cheeks, "What's worrying you?" she asked. "Are you still mad about Zharkov?"

Before the last but one of the dress rehearsals, on Monday, Zharkov had exploded a bomb. He had given notice that he intended to con-

duct upon the first night. His chief reason, he had allowed it to be understood, was to ensure a proper performance of a serenade of his which Forshaw and Inman, for the sake of peace, had at last agreed to put into one of the ballet scenes. But he had also condescendingly intimated that he wished to lend *éclat* to the opening and pay a "compliment to his young colleague."

In vain Peter had pleaded with Forshaw that the serenade (which he suspected would be found in substance somewhere in the works of Suppé) was violently out of harmony with the whole score of *In Modern Mood*; in vain did he represent that it was unfair to him to have his music handed over at the last minute to a conductor who had not familiarized himself with it during the rehearsals; in vain did he urge Les Linacre to stand up and maintain his position. Forshaw wanted peace, and told Peter that he must be getting a swelled head to object to having his score conducted by a musician of Zharkov's eminence. Les pointed out that Zharkov was Musical Director for all Fizz productions, and that he could no more prevent him from exercising his right to occupy the conductor's stand when he wished than his own leader could dispute the baton with him. "Don't make heavy weather over it, old boy!" he had advised Peter. "My chaps will see you through!" "If they're allowed to!" Peter had thought, for he could not believe that Zharkov had laid hands on his precious score with a view simply to giving it the best possible performance.

Gail now sought to reassure him while with deft fingers she mixed blue and silver from an array of small pots for her eyelids. "If I wanted to worry," she said, "I'd be thinking about Larry's voice. . . . It's not entirely an act, you know!"

This was even truer than she or Peter realized. Nobody but Larry Milner's wife and his trusted dresser knew the full truth about that throat of his, what a thin partition separated him from total (and possibly final) loss of voice, how many minor operations he had had, how assiduously his throat had to be sprayed and gargled, how essential for him was the microphone he manipulated with such skill and such impish touches of humour. They did not know, in short, that the clown of whimsical genius was a soldier battling heroically with a creeping disease that must sooner or later throttle him with its clammy fingers.

Peter murmured that he had thought Larry's trouble no worse than usual at the dress rehearsal, and then fell silently to watching the completion of Gail's make-up. There was always to him a thrilling mystery about the way in which step by step her face was transformed and enlarged for the spotlights, while remaining always the quintessential Gail Darien. Slowly the lovely mask took form—the lips brought up in vivid outline with the red grease-paint pencil, dulled for a moment by the cloud of powder from the large, fluffy puff, and restored again, alive and sparkling, with the lip-brush. Then the

eyebrow pencil traced its arches, and made its lines under and over the lids; the orange stick inserted a vermilion pin-point at the corner of each eye, waking it to double lustre; the false eyelashes, waiting curled-up in the flap of an envelope since last night, were lifted on finger-tips and affixed with infinite care in their places, already wet with spirit-gum. As Gail closed first one eye and then another during this delicate operation, she remarked to Peter, "Did you see the gallery queue? . . . Some of them had been here since yesterday at this time—I stopped and asked them, coming in. . . . Aren't they wonderful?"

"Aren't *you* wonderful!" exclaimed Peter. "Completely fearless, aren't you?"

"Why wouldn't I be, Peter?" she asked, as she took up the little oblong block of eyelash black, moistened it, despite the taps and basin near at hand, in the homely way established by tradition, and began to darken her lashes with blobs of it. "They liked me at Blackpool, didn't they . . . when I was . . . well . . . far from the top of my form? They called me again and again from every part of the house. . . . So why wouldn't they like me to-night? I'm the same Gail Darien . . . better, I hope, with all those singing-lessons I had in the spring from Maurice Fanchon . . . and with your songs to sing again, Peter!"

"You darling!" he said huskily; and at that moment Evie slipped in again, bringing with her from the near-by stage as she entered that indefinable hollow rumour and sound, made up of a hundred steps and voices, that signifies the tension of a first performance. "Time you got your frock on, dear!" she said. "He's just started to call the quarter!"

Gail stood up in her wrap, and removed her hair-cover. The shimmering waves, dressed in a page-boy bob like that in which Peter had first seen her on the shallow stage of the Emporium at Blackpool, and carried back in a pompadour roll over her tall forehead, fell into place as the frame of the brilliant stage face she had been creating in the last quarter of an hour. The illusion formed from flesh and blood was complete.

"You must clear out, Peter!" she said calmly, and putting her face forward towards him, "Kiss me somewhere where you won't do any harm!" she told him. "Come round in the interval, won't you?"

IV

Peter went through the pass-door on the stalls level; and, as the box in which he had been allotted a seat was a circle one, he made his way out through the pillared vestibule, which was still crowded with arrivals in white waistcoats and splendid evening wraps, and

mounted to the Dress Circle by the exquisitely proportioned Grand Staircase, with its barrelled ceiling, designed by Holland in the days of George IV.

In the great foyer, where the "house-warming" party had been held a few nights before, the old players in their togas and mantles stood with inscrutable stone eyeballs, drowned in shadow. As Peter hurried across it he encountered a squat figure with a tangle of hair on its forehead. "Must you be as late as this ringing up?" snarled Athelstan Rigglesworth, tossing the stump of his cigar into a brass receptacle filled with sand.

Peter made some awkward, propitiatory reply, and hastened into the passage leading round behind the circle boxes. But at the entrance to it a spick-and-span figure stepped out of a door with "Bar" in illuminated letters over it. "Hulloa, old lad!" exclaimed Monty Du Parc, beaming at him. "Feeling as if beetles were crawling in your tummy? . . . What about a quick one before the flag falls?"

"No thanks, Monty, not now!" replied Peter curtly, and turned the door-handle of his box.

After exchanging civilities with the friends of the management who occupied the other claw-footed mahogany chairs, Peter settled down to survey the massed first-night audience, so restless and loud-voiced, so intimidating with its air of a jury . . . and of a jury willing to give no more than a distracted attention to the evidence. The murmur of the many conversations was pierced by runs from the flute, throbs from the double basses, and *glissandi* from the harp as the orchestra tuned. The other people in the box with Peter kept pointing out celebrities and notorieties entering this or that part of the house, and sometimes little bursts of applause showed the correctness of their identifications. Peter wished they would desist, for at each name they mentioned he felt a sinking conviction that neither that eminent socialite Lady Y——, for example, nor Pamela Carraway the novelist, nor the Secretary of State for Commerce, could possibly in their heart of hearts want to see *In Modern Mood*.

Suddenly, in a box opposite, he caught sight of Beryl, majestic in purple silk, with two foreign-looking men, friends of her *maestro*, and gave her a constrained smile. Ever since he had learned that she had gone to live with Zharkov in his St. John's Wood flat, Peter's relations with her had been frigid. After that he sat with his eyes fixed on the spectacle below the proscenium with its severe classical pediment and its purple tableau curtains weighted by their deep gold fringe. He gazed over at the evening gowns, like a shower of many-coloured petals from above, at the flash of jewelled hair-clips, at the black shoulders of the *blasé*-looking male escorts. With a pounding heart and an increasingly dry throat he waited, until the house lights suddenly went down, carrying his spirits with them in a swooping sensation, and a white spot from the circle was cast upon the bowing

form of Grigori Zharkov, who had just taken the conductor's stand.

"Mountebank!" muttered Peter between his gritted teeth; then in the hush that had fallen upon the buzzing audience, he saw the flash-through to the orchestra from behind, and Zharkov pompously raised his baton.

The flag had fallen!

CHAPTER NINE

I

THUNDERS of applause, the loudest he had ever heard in his life, going on unbrokenly, moment after moment, and through it the figure of Gail coming, was it the eighth or the ninth time through the tabs, to bow her acknowledgments? . . . It's a furore . . . a furore! . . . Don't worry any more! . . . Of course, it's a furore! . . . How large and near Gail's face looked, and how oddly the colour of the tabs changed from purple to pink and then to primrose . . . the colour of the distempering in Peter's bedroom in Chelsea, at which he was staring, while outside, lumbering, bumping, jolting, there went past along the Embankment a line of lorries—R.A.F. transport carrying an urgent cargo, though Peter did not know that. He realized that this was the noise that had filled his dream with the delusion of roaring applause; and in one cold wave, the memory of last night's disaster broke over him and pinned him to his pillow.

He knew that it would be wiser to spring out of bed and brace himself to confront the future; but he had not the strength to stop his weary mind from going yet again over every detail of the calamity . . . the fruitless exercise he had been engaged upon when he dropped uneasily to sleep about four o'clock.

He remembered very well the first thing that had gone wrong after a pictorial opening well-received . . . and how for this Zharkov had been wholly to blame. Gail had made her entrance in the Second Scene, by parachute, to a friendly, but cautiously expectant, reception from the house. The girls had quickly helped her to strip off her flying-kit, and to emerge from its chrysalis, a gorgeous white-and-gold butterfly, in a fantastic futurist fashion dress. Then, with exhilarating verve, she had dashed into her first song, "Miss Tomorrow!" . . . She had not got through the verse before Peter, exasperatedly tearing at a loose strip of binding on the ledge of his box, realized that Zharkov was ruining the song. He was dragging it, down him!—destroying the crispness of the melody, throwing Gail out of time, and hampering the ballet behind her in their springing movements! The result was as if the whole number had been blanketed.

At one moment Peter half rose from his seat, resolved to rush down into the orchestra pit, whatever sensation he might cause, and wrest the baton from Zharkov's fingers. He could see him standing like a poker in his place, frowning at the score, and mechanically beating a time that had neither speed nor nuance nor understanding of the spirit of the music. Peter saw the leader looking up desperately at

him; but no band could have coped with such conducting . . . the song was becoming a kind of soup . . . surely the Russian must be doing it on purpose! Peter could bear it no longer, and he was turning to make for the door when, to his horror, he saw the run-overs close the scene to a tinkle of frigid applause. One at least of the songs of the evening was lost!

Against this parody of conducting Gail and the other artists had to struggle all the time, so that everything, whether it was the modernistic fancy of the aerial gardens of 1960 or the nostalgic Tennysonian vision of a Victorian rose-bower, took on the same character of mild prettiness—one could feel the condescension in the moderate applause. The nerves of the company began to fray; and the high-strung Larry Milner was especially affected. His hoarseness became perceptible, and once he lowered his microphone to address a sharp rebuke, which could be heard from the front rows of the stalls, to the orchestra. Nor did Zharkov raise the depression that was settling on the audience when, during a wait between two scenes, he failed to repeat the refrain from the earlier one, and left the house in whispering hush while, with the point of his baton dramatically poised upon the desk, he stood staring about him, as if looking for a friend in front and hoping to be recognized in return.

At the interval the audience seemed anxious to get to the bars and Peter rushed behind in search of Gail. He found her in the passage just outside her room letting fly at the *maestro* in language seldom heard by a director of Fizz from one of his employees—a he liked to think of them. Gail's voice was powerful when she was roused, and she was heard (with sympathetic approbation) in the flies. Pallant was dodging about agitatedly behind the disputants caught between the devil of a leading lady's wrath and the deep—the very deep—sea of a director's displeasure if he did not silence her. All he could think of to say was, "Quick on the change, Gail please! Quick on the change!"

Suddenly Gail caught sight of Peter; and after one glance at his face squeezed his hand, and, murmuring, "All right! We'll pull it through yet, in spite of that kike!" went into her room and slammed the door. Zharkov, with his eyes looking like ink-pools illuminated by reflections from a crackling fire, bellowed after her in a tongue which did not sound like that of Tolstoy; and Peter, shrugging his shoulders despairingly, went back to his box, where he had to endure the insincere compliments of the other occupants. In the circumstances he preferred not to encounter Beryl.

As the second part proceeded Peter, in spite of his numb feeling of failure, could not help being stirred by a passionate admiration for the way in which Gail was fighting to save the show. She had a break in her "Blues—I don't know why" number, for that was chiefly piano accompaniment, delicately played by one of Le

Linacre's young men, and the audience responded. If that song, Peter thought, had been put on earlier, everything might have been different.

But though this first-night assemblage was hardly of a fibre to appreciate it, Peter was most exalted by her acting in the tragic sketch he had been daring enough to introduce, depicting the Nazi entry into Prague. Peter was no politician, but he had all the artist's and the instinctive individualist's loathing of the machine-like strut and the yelling mouths of Hitler's Youth as he saw them in picture papers. Here, in a scene showing one of the spire-crowned mediæval streets of the Bohemian capital, he had shown a young Jewish violinist shot by an S.S. man while playing and singing a patriotic song on a table outside an inn. Gail had played the boy's sweetheart, and the lament she sang over her lover's body, after the troops of the conqueror had defiled past it in their swastikas and jack-boots, had been so true in pathos and sincerity that the whole house had been reluctantly hushed into respect. Not even Athelstan Rigglesworth's hoarse ejaculation, "Corny!" succeeded in breaking Gail's hold.

She did not know that the music of this lament was the melody that had sprung up in her lover's heart during that long night of suffering on the cliff at Blackpool, a melody to which he had at last found the words. To-night, with its pathos intensified by the power of her acting and the heart-searching appeal of her voice, it filled Peter's eyes with tears. And it seemed to him in the few moments of that scene that there was a serenity to be attained by men and women that no stroke of fate could assail . . . far less such trivialities as the success or failure of a show! Just for a moment he felt that in a world where such beauty was possible he could never be unhappy again!

Well, he had had need of any fortitude he could acquire! For another blow was to fall on him in the reception given to his modernistic ballet, "Traffic Lights." He had always known this was the biggest risk of the show. The music, technically perhaps the cleverest he had yet composed, with its transcription of the noises of a great city, had nothing to tickle the ears of those who wanted another "Park Nobody Knows," and the unusual movements of the dancers, brilliantly designed to stylize the movements of traffic-police-men, pedestrians, cyclists, racing-cars, motor-buses, and heavy lorries, represented by individuals or linked groups, had only to rouse one titter from the front for the whole house to dissolve in mockery. And the titter came—early, so that the tabs closed amid general jeers and whistling from the gallery. Léonie Valterra, the ballet-mistress, was in tears at the side; and Jacqueline Rogers, the principal dancer, who had been suffering in bronze varnish as Gilbert's Eros from Piccadilly, was wishing with all her soul that she had made her West

End debut in some less crazy ballet than this. Peter felt that he did not care what happened now: nothing could be worse.

But yet worse was to befall. Peter should have felt some consolation when Bobo Baggaley, coming immediately after the ill-fated "Traffic Lights," stopped the show with "My New Hat!"—the only uproarious success of the evening. (The lucky little devil had been freed from the incubus of Zharkov's conducting, since there had been words at the rehearsal, and the *maestro* had scornfully announced that he would leave "that stuff" to be taken by the leader.) But this was the last hopeful moment.

When the demon of misfortune takes hold of a first night, nothing seems to be unaffected. The last great production number, leading into the finale, was one on which the greatest hopes had been founded—"Manhattan Madness." This opened on a night-view from the roof of a Manhattan slum rooming-house. A girl and a boy, meanly dressed, sat hand in hand on the coping looking over the night skyline of New York, a mass of pointed lights against a back-cloth of stars. An elevated electric train rumbled by in the distance with twinkling windows; from the street a police-car siren gave its high-pitched scream; the rhythm of a dance-band hummed up from one of the lower floors.

As he heard the gay music, the boy, turning to the girl, murmured, "That's what I wanna give you, baby! Just one night with the swell folks below, just one night of life and luxury!"

The girl drew his face to hers and kissed him. "That's just Manhattan madness," she told him. "Still, I guess there's no law against dreamin'."

And at that, by a colossal mechanical device, the whole scene on its false stages broke into two parts disclosing another built inside it, the interior of the *Café Soci  t  *, the most brilliant jewel in Gotham's glittering night-life. A coloured band in white evening jackets swung its frenzied jive, the guests in a fashion display of marvellous gowns danced on a raised floor among the crowded supper tables, and presently spotlamps from a dozen different sources picked out the Boy and Girl again, he in top-hat and tails, she in a long white tulle and net dance-frock.

It was in this scene that Gail had planned to surprise her fans. Although she had had no proper ballet training, her early experiences in the school of acrobatic dancing, joined to her natural grace of movement, made her well able to perform a ball-room exhibition routine. Helped considerably (why deny it?) by her partner, the Lancashire lad discovered by Bob Forshaw and billed as "the English Astaire," she had perfected herself in the steps of the rhumba, "Manhattan Madness." Supple and light, she whirled round and round with her yards of skirt at times completely hiding both herself and her partner in a white froth. Sometimes on a table-top,

sometimes on the steps rising at the back of the restaurant, they danced without ever losing time or unison. Finally they spun into an open elevator at the top of the stairs, to be borne, with their shadows still dancing on the ground-glass doors, up and up, past story after story, until the two stages closed again, and once more the sordid roof-line appeared with its innumerable clothes-lines festooned with washing between the chimney-pots, while Boy and Girl, in their drab clothing as before, stood embracing and gazing at the stars. . . .

So it was to have been! But how it happened that the stage machinery jammed right in the middle of the change to the *Café Société*, and refused absolutely to budge again, nobody ever discovered. It was natural to suspect the hand of Hughie; but, oddly enough, he was able to prove a clear alibi. Anyhow, the whole scene was reduced to chaos, and Gail lost the opportunity of getting a verdict from the first-night audience on her abilities as a dancer. Pallent could do nothing but order the chorus on to fill what was available of the stage, and signal the finale to the show.

In a run of two years such a catastrophe would not happen twice; but the night it chose to happen was the one when its consequences were fatal. The general impression among the audience was not that anything had gone wrong, but that another outrageous "cubist" or "surrealist" effect had been sprung upon them—which made them more unforgiving than they might have been had they known the truth. There was fresh booing and derisive laughter from upstairs, countered at length from the stalls (where Fizz had many friends) by "consolation" applause, which permitted Larry Milner to wheeze into the mike with the last remnants of his voice his thanks for "a very kind reception" and his assurance that "any little difficulties incidental to a first night" would not occur "when you come again tomorrow"—a last rueful jest, greeted with ironical laughter. . . .

Peter's recollections of this and the other dreadful moments of the evening acted at last like gadflies to drive him from his bed and into a cold bath. There were still the papers to face!

He felt pretty limp when he had faced them. All were bad, but Athelstan Rigglesworth, as Peter had anticipated, surpassed himself, and not, unfortunately, without some show of reason. In his article Peter traced a design (which was to be followed by several of the evening and Sunday papers) to make Gail the scapegoat. In spite, it was suggested, of the mishaps of the opening performance, there was plenty of good material in the show, which might very well have succeeded with a less "colourless" leading lady. It had been a case of a young actress overloaded with a part beyond her capacities, and not aided, Athelstan was pleased to add with a final flick, by the "musical eccentricities" of "ex-journalist Peter Warner." This was a trifling salve to Fizz; but on the whole, Peter reflected at the end of his read-

ing, if anybody thought that Fizz had "the Press in its pocket," here was the answer to them!

He sprang up from his neglected breakfast, and going over to the telephone dialled Gail. In a minute her voice came through, clear and fresh.

"Have you read them?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, darling! Pat and Evie tried to hide them in all kinds of queer places around the flat, but I routed them out. . . . They didn't surprise me. It's Larry I'm sorry for—I wonder if he'll be able to go on to-night at all with his voice."

"Look, Gail!" said Peter, "I want to say this. Whatever you may read in these papers, you were simply wonderful!"

"Ta, Peter! . . . Nobody but you has thought of saying that!"

"Don't be flippant . . . though I love you for it! Because I'm serious! Gail, in the Nazi scene last night you were too lovely for words. Seems to make it all worth while . . . if you understand me?"

"Yes, dear, I do," she answered gently. "You're a sweet person, Peter! I must get dressed now and go down to the theatre for the inquest. Call for me and take me to lunch, will you?"

"Rather. We'll go somewhere unobtrusive, eh?"

"Unobtrusive—nothing!" came her crisp reply. "We'll go to the Colonna . . . and show ourselves! . . . And, Peter, if you care to take me to the Turin to dance after the show to-night, that'll be O.K. by me, too. . . . Am I being very expensive?"

He chuckled. "I'll ask Bob Forshaw to lend me a quid!—I'm beyond caring what becomes of me!"

II

The "inquest" held in the theatre at twelve that morning was even grimmer than Gail had expected. It was conducted by the Chairman in person, with something of the ruthlessness and energy he used to display in old days when trimming his little touring shows into shape. The "Traffic Lights" ballet went out at a slash, and so did two more of Gail's scenes. She had hoped for some support from Inman, but for once the producer seemed stunned. He sat in the stalls beside Forshaw, wrapped in an overcoat, although it was warm summer weather, and hardly raised his voice in the whole debate.

Forshaw, moreover, made it plain that his first cuts and changes were only the beginning of a complete remodelling of the show, which he intended to take in hand during the next few days. He was resolved to fight with very weapon he knew to save his £30,000, and no matter who might suffer or what feelings might be outraged, *In Modern Mood* was to be put at once into a "second edition." This determination of his led to a battle of the giants, only rumours of which percolated as far

even as the stars' dressing-rooms. Forshaw was strongly supported by Zharkov, who emphasized his prophetic wisdom on the subject of "this Warner's" music, and announced that he was ready to start at once on a complete revision of the score, with suitable additions. Monty chimed in, declaring that from all he heard in the newspaper world Gail Darien had been the main cause of the first-night flop. "They all say the same thing, Chief," he told Forshaw. "She's colourless; she hasn't got *it*; and she plays over our public's head, especially in the Nazi scene. They all think we're crazy not to give the lead to Bobo," he added, watching Forshaw's reaction narrowly.

"I'll see to that!" replied Forshaw, nodding with tight lips. "And we mun get Larry out, too," he added. "I didn't engage him for a dumb-show."

Upon that Inman broke his silence with an angry protest. They were bent upon cheapening and vulgarizing the whole show, and he would take no more responsibility for it.

"Why don't you take a holiday, Arthur?" suggested Forshaw soothingly. "You've done wonders for us, but every man needs a rest some taim, you know."

Inman gave him a queer look and fell silent again. Forshaw looked across to Zaleski. "What's your view, Ivan?" he asked.

"Imskarian!" shouted Zaleski furiously. "Von entermeier! Ay-o rivulski, im ippleland . . . Scharno! Ay! no . . . no . . . no!"

"I take it that's a vote for us," said Bob Forshaw. "You see, Arthur, we're all against you!"

III

On a morning near the end of July, Gail stood looking through the windows of her flat over the Park, while Patricia Worthington sat eating her breakfast and reading the *Daily Mirror*, processes with her so closely intermingled that when her sister came to stay she had asked which was the newspaper and which the marmalade bowl.

"If I've got to let this place go," said Gail abruptly, "I might as well make up my mind to do it at once."

"Oh, but must you?" murmured Pat, whose interest in the problem was platonic, since in a week or two she hoped to be married and honeymooning in the South Seas.

Gail came back to the table, and while she poured herself out a second cup of coffee, re-read the house-agent's letter. "You see," she said, "he calls this 'an exceptionally favourable offer for the remainder of the lease, such as we might find it difficult to obtain again, if we do not avail ourselves of it at once.' D——d him, why must he write as if it was *his* home?"

"Just business talky, darling. They all do. When I was having my divorce my solicitor, aged sixty, with a wart on his lip—disgusting!

—wrote to me, 'Should your husband decide to put in appearance, we may find ourselves in a compromising position.' . . . How's *your* divorce, by the way?"

"I wouldn't know. My solicitor's got to apply for an absolute something or other. . . . About this flat——"

"I wouldn't have a house or a flat in London just now for anything."

"Why on earth not, Pat?"

"Because there's going to be a war, that's why."

"You talk just like Ronnie Linfield when we used to hunt together. What do we want to go to war about?"

"This Mr Hitler," said Pat vaguely. "By the way, they say that's only a stage-name, and that he's really called something incredibly obscene."

"Never mind what he's called. What difference would a war make to you and me, anyway? They won't take us for *vivandières* (with dance), will they?"

"God knows, darling! I haven't the legs for the part; you have, curse you! But London will be a hot-spot, you know. Just read what they say in the *Mirror* this morning!" She offered Gail the paper.

"Take it away!" exclaimed Gail, snatching her fingers off the table.

"Look, love! Do you have to make a fly-paper of it every morning?"

"Sorry! Marmalade's so awkward, isn't it? . . . Hell! Where's my serviette? Have you a hanky on you, dear?"

"Yes, and I'm holding tight to it! Go and wash your hands!"

Pat rose. "I think I'd better. That milliner woman will be wild if I arrive late *and* sticky." She paused a moment at the door. "Er, Gail dear," she asked with a sympathetic look, "any news?"

"Notice going up to-morrow," replied Gail calmly.

"Oh, dear, I am sorry! . . . But these sort of re-hashes never succeed, do they?"

"Not with Bobo Baggaley as leading lady! It was Zaleski, I was told, who insisted the show should come off at once; at least he kicked all their shins most dreadfully under the table in the Board Room when anything else was suggested. . . . I should worry, anyway."

"Have you—have you anything else in view?"

"Yes, my bills! And this Income Tax! I never paid it before. Why should they badger me now?"

Patricia gave a whistle. "Income Tax is a bug-house, darling," she said. "Ben used to attend to mine until I got my decree absolute. Then when I sent the papers on to him as usual, he sent them back, saying it was no longer any business of his, the meanie! . . . It isn't as if we'd ever had any sort of a row, either! . . . God, I'm late! Cheer up, old girl! It'll sort itself out! Just pass me over the *Mirror*, will you? I'll look at it in the taxi."

"Pick it up yourself, if you want it!" said Gail ungraciously.

Left alone, she wandered round the room, straightening and caressing some favourite ornaments and bits of furniture, opening the deadly drawer of the writing-table into which she was still in the habit of cramming her bills, and locking it quickly again as they tried to escape over the edge. Her mouth tightened. "Good-bye to all this!" she thought, gazing once more round her beloved pink-and-grey room, with the black cushions and the moonshine picture of the Parthenope glimmering on the wall. "Wigan, Preston, Blackburn!" she murmured bitterly. "And the fish-boxes on Crewe Station! . . . All alone this time, too!"

The telephone bell rang, and she pulled off the doll, who had been given a new crinoline to celebrate the opening of *In Modern Mood*. "Who is it?" she asked. "Oh, Peter! . . . Sweet of you to ring! Yes, I knew last night it was coming off. . . . No, I'm not shattered, really. What about you, though? Are you likely to be coming round? . . . Going *where*? . . . What on earth are you doing at the Admiralty? . . . Yes, I know you were always keen on wireless gadgets. . . . You can't go to sea, Peter! Anyhow, there isn't going to be a war. . . . Oh, well, come to tea and tell me all about it!"

Gail laid down the receiver with her ideas in a whirl . . . Peter going to see a man to whom he had an introduction in the Admiralty, to find out, how, if war broke out, he could become a wireless operator in the Navy? . . . Was all this talk about war serious, then? She felt her whole world falling to pieces around her.

III

This impression grew upon her during the following days. A polite gentleman called, sending Gail's heart into her mouth, as always now when a strange man asked to see her, for fear it meant a summons or something about her debts, and fitted her with a gas-mask in which she looked like a pig (she said) and couldn't breathe. Wild rumours flitted through the dressing-rooms at the Parthenope, the most startling of which was that Bob Forshaw would, as soon as *In Modern Mood* was withdrawn, let the Parthenope to Zaleski and the Isidore Raymond group to put on a show for which only one of London's biggest theatres would suffice. This, if true, explained why Zaleski had been so vehement in demanding the early death of *In Modern Mood*. Peter, when he heard it, urged Gail to try to get in with "Raymondy," as the new syndicate, Fizz's rival, was already being dubbed. He had called to tell her the uncertain result of his wire-pulling at the Admiralty, but showed himself more concerned about her affairs. "That gang wouldn't have any use for me," she answered. "Who will now? Even Joseph Stulitzer was 'engaged' when I rang yesterday."

But perhaps the most trying thing she had to bear was Bobo Baggaley's hysterics when the notices were put up. She rushed—uninvited—into Gail's room to seek consolation. "I'm sure I've done m-m-my best to s-s-save it!" she sobbed wildly. "But I don't believe B-Bob *wants* it saved. He said n-n-never mind; it wasn't, the right s-s-show for me, anyway. It had been built round s-s-someone else who was n-n-no b-b-b——y good. . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Gail! I'm sure he didn't mean you, dear!"

"No, darling! You wouldn't repeat it if he had, would you?" replied Gail, letting Bobo's head, which she had been supporting to bathe her swollen eyelids, fall with a crack against the back of her chair. "Now get out, will you? Ask your own dresser to fix you. This is my room, at any rate for a few nights more!"

Two or three days later, returning to her flat in the afternoon after some shopping which she regretted as soon as she had done it, she was let in by Evie with a mysterious air. "There's a gentleman waiting for you, duckie, in the drawing-room."

Gail stopped dead, just inside the door. "Who is it?" she demanded. "Not Mr Du P——"

"Oh no, dear! I shouldn't dream of letting him in!"

"It's not that man again who came yesterday on behalf of Lonnen & Johns?"

"Of course not! *You* let *him* in, dear, not me!"

"Then who is it, Evie?"

Evie looked anguished. "I thought I ought to let him wait for you, if he wanted to, dear! You'd better go in and see him!"

Gail, making an impatient sound, opened the drawing-room door and went in. Derek rose from the sofa and looked warily at her.

She went white. "How dare you?" she said. "How could you?"

"It wasn't an easy thing to do," he answered in a dogged tone, "but I thought I'd risk it."

"Well, you can go—go at once!" Her lip began to tremble, and Derek swiftly took advantage of this sign of weakness. "Gail," he said, "I only ask you to listen to me for five minutes. I've something very difficult to say to you. It is that I've been a great fool."

"Only a fool?" she asked, with her face averted from him, and silently swallowing sobs.

He shrugged. "Add anything else you think proper," he said with a return to his familiar manner. "Call me a cad, a brute, a betrayer—if you must slice off some ham! For me there's no sin except want of intelligence . . . and that's what I plead guilty to."

"Where's all this getting us?" enquired Gail, summoning courage to face round and stare palely at him, her handkerchief clenched in her fingers.

"To this! That I've come to own I yielded to a silly infatuation—

as so many intelligent men have done before me! . . . My God! how I misread that woman! Gail, you wouldn't believe how she's treated me! She's killed something deep inside me that I don't believe will ever live again——"

"And what do you suppose that is?" asked Gail with a bitter smile. "Your heart?"

"Sentimental way of putting it," he answered, "but it will serve."

"Know yourself better, Derek! All Beryl Warner has hurt in you is your vanity."

"Gail! I couldn't have believed——"

"Well, open your eyes now! I'm no longer the woman you threw away."

"That's an unfair thing to say!"

"But pretty true, isn't it? I've changed."

"Yes, you've become d——d hard! I can see that, at any rate."

"Think desertion softens a woman? It was go hard or go under for me! Sorry I couldn't oblige you by going under!"

"Look, Gail! These crushing repartees get us nowhere! They may help to get the resentment out of your system, and that's something, I suppose. But what I ask of you . . . and I think I have a right to ask it, because, after all, it was I who found the courage to come to you and confess my mistake . . . what I ask of you is to consider whether we can't start again. I—I—I'm sorry . . . d——d sorry . . . for what happened. If you understood . . . if you had any notion how I was driven . . . how I was tempted . . . you might feel a little bit sorry for me, perhaps. But is it too late now to wash out the past twelve months?"

"You must be haywire to think it! I never heard of such a nerve——"

"Don't be hasty, Gail! I've a good deal to offer, when all's said. You perhaps owe more than you would care to admit to me for the things I've taught you one way and another. I won't speak of what I can offer on the personal side at this moment——"

"Just as well, maybe!"

"But I'll ask you to think over the practical aspect. I've had an offer from America."

"From America?" She could not hide a flicker of interest.

"Yes. Krause has been on this side this month. I believe it was actually an affair of the hear-r-rt that brought him over, not business. But he couldn't keep away from the theatres, and he saw me play Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man* at Bristol. People who ought to know say I put something into the part that no one has done before. I've been told that if only Hitler could see it it would put him out of love with war, and maybe save Europe. That's an exaggeration, of course . . . to some extent . . . but I must have found *something* that others haven't. Krause anyway came to see me three times; and

now he's offered to take me back with him to New York under a five years' contract! He's paying me wonderfully. My salary's progressive, and by the end of my five years with him I shall be able to live on Riverside Drive among the playboys! What do you know about that?"

"Oh, I'm so glad, Derek!" cried Gail. "You've earned it, and now it's come to you!"

"Yes, but that's not all, my dear!" he exulted. "The old man said, 'I reckon we'll have to find the right plays for your style over there, Mr Vortigern!' So I told him he needn't worry, I had the plays ready, and gave him *Scroll of Fire* to read. That's my latest: you haven't seen it, of course, but it shows this madhouse of a Europe what's coming to it and why. . . . Believe me, Gail, if I can appear in New York as Poganov, the Commissar, in *Scroll of Fire*, I'm made!"

Gail sighed. "I wish you luck," she said. "I hope you go over big. But I don't see just where I come into the wonderful picture."

"Well, by all I hear, your show here isn't doing exactly brilliantly." He grinned with uncontrollable malice, but hastily corrected himself. "I'm terribly sorry for that, though I never had any faith in this chap Warner's cream-puffs. Do me the justice to remember I always said they were no good!"

"You always said so—yes."

"Well, forget it now! In the U.S.A. it'll be very different. Over there I shall be in a position to fix you up with worth-while contracts—"

"Wonderful to be the wife of a star, won't it?"

"You don't have to sneer, Gail! I told you I was holding back the personal side at the moment."

"Is there a personal side, then?"

"Of course! I was never glib at love-making—"

"You'll never make love to me again, Derek!"

"Gail! I won't take that from you! I don't believe it! After all those years—"

"I'm afraid you'll have to believe it! I could never love you again. You drove me to do things I'm ashamed of. You've made me hate myself, and so . . . it's no use talking. It just can't be."

"Gail," he said with a change of tone, "do you realize what's coming to you if you don't snatch at this chance to get clear away to America? Do you understand that the old world is going up in smoke within a month or two?"

"Is that a line out of the play?"

"I assure you it's a great deal more than that. Those who know most have got the wind up worst."

"Including you, it seems!"

Derek slapped his hand down on a table. "I'm fighting no capitalists'

war; that's a sure thing! I can do a deal better with my brains than spill them in the mud and blood of a fool's apocalypse. . . . That's a good title for a play, by the way, *Fool's Apocalypse*. . . . Yes! . . . Krause's sure he can wangle a passport for me on cultural grounds . . . boosting English drama among our cousins . . . and I can always put in a doctor's certificate over that kidney of mine. Mind you, if this were the *real* war, the workers against the money-bags, no doctor should stop me from staying to pump lead out of a tommy-gun into your Chamberlains and Churchills and Daladiers! But, as it is, I'm off while the going's good, and you'll be a little fool not to do the same."

"You really believe London's going to be burnt up?"

"As sure as God sees me!"

"But you don't believe He does, do you?" She walked across to the window and stepped out on to the balcony.

The sky burned tranquilly above the lustrous summer foliage of the Park, and over the trees the domes and towers of Kensington showed majestic and unperturbed as the mighty nineteenth century itself. To right and left, the fresh paint on the stucco Victorian terraces shone serenely, while down the roadway hummed the stream of gleaming private cars, darting taxis, and impressive commercial vehicles. On the balcony at her feet a knot of brown-coated sparrows twittered and squabbled for an instant over a crumb; then swooped away.

"Good ole London!" said Gail with a sudden cockney accent—jest or momentary uprush of heredity? "I'm sticking it here! I'm just one of those little London sparrows, you see?" She looked up to the sky and made a street arab's gesture of defiance with thumb and fingers. "Mr 'Tiler!" she said; then abruptly resumed her normal self as she re-entered the room. "It's not a bit of use, Derek!" she told him. "I think you meant it kindly . . . all that about taking me away from the war that isn't going to happen! But I'll take my chance, and . . . now, I suppose I'd better get on with that divorce stuff."

He flushed a dull purple. "You needn't answer me with a slap in the face!" he growled.

"Slap in the face—how? . . . Because I mentioned the divorce? But do you want to be tied to me, when it's hopeless?"

"It's useless to talk to you when you're in this mood!" he said. "But I'll give you another chance. If you think better of it, wire me at the Theatre Club, Guildford Street . . . before Saturday!"

After she had let him out, Evie came rather timidly back into the drawing-room, whence Gail had again gone out on to the balcony. "I hope, dear," she said, "I wasn't wrong in asking him in to wait?"

"No, Evie! Just a silly, sentimental ass! . . . Make some tea, for God's sake!"

"Did you call on the house agent, dear, while you were out?"

"Yes. He says those people have withdrawn their offer. He doesn't

think he can let the flat at all now. People are getting scared about taking places in London. I missed the bus, I'm afraid."

"Oh, what a pity! Such a heavy rent, isn't it?" Evie moved towards the door.

"Evie, just a minute! Do you think those people in the basement flat will let us go down there for shelter if there's a spot of bother any time?"

"I couldn't say, dear."

"Well, I'm afraid I shall rush down there in my nightie, whether they like it or not. You see, Evie, I'm a most terrible coward . . . that's what's wrong with me!"

END OF PART TWO



PART THREE



CHAPTER ONE

I

THE hangar was cold, with a penetrating, misty coldness such as Gail thought she had never felt in her life before. Standing on the damp grass floor at the side of the "stage"—a converted boxing-ring, rigged out with a rude proscenium of bunting—she shivered, although her thin evening gown was still covered by layers of wraps and a fur coat, while her head was swathed in a scarf, and rubber boots enlarged her feet. The rest of the concert party, dressing and making-up as best they could in the workshops at the side of the building, or on the wings of the planes in for repair, seemed equally forlorn and wretched, except for Jack Kelham, who acted as manager, comedian, accompanist (as likely as not), consoler in all troubles, and contriver of ways over all obstacles. At this very moment, in evening dress which really deserved to be called "immaculate," he was playing light-hearted waltzes on the piano, as if there were no such things in the world as colds, coughs, bronchitis, chilblains, or hunger (their last meal had been a slice of breakfast sausage, a piece of lettuce released by the maggots from further service, and a half-cup of cold Naafi tea at the hostel sixty miles away), as if there were no such things, either, as depression or fear.

There had been a warning in the camp just as they arrived an hour ago in their single-decker bus; then sounds of remote gun-fire, and one or two thuds that sounded disagreeably near, in spite of their muffled quality. Planes—ours or theirs?—were perpetually throbbing overhead, and nobody seemed able to tell them whether it was true or not that the all-clear had just sounded.

Gail peeped through the proscenium draperies, on which the Ensa Shields hung slightly askew, down the length of the hangar, a cavern of shadow, blacked-out with reasonable care by service standards, though the chinks would have cost a civilian householder £2. A dozen braziers dotted the expanse with their red glow; but as the great doors at the far end had to be kept open ready for ops, they did little to counteract the cold. Snow was falling on the airfield outside, and every now and then a flake eddied through the patchwork repairs to the large hole torn in the roof by a bomb a year ago.

Jack Kelham left the piano and tested the feeble footlights—a line of ten or twelve 25-watt lamps rigged along the front of the platform. "For all they'll see of us," he grumbled, "we might as well keep our overcoats on. Anyway, they won't be able to aim with spanners as they did at the last place!"

"They won't," answered Nita, who was sitting huddled on the

steps leading up to the platform, "throw anything so long as *you* don't sing, Jack!"

Gail thought this a bit cantankerous; but she remembered that Nita had a tooth with an abscess, and that for two weeks they had not been near enough to a town or stopped long enough anywhere for her to find a dentist or even a chemist.

Jack, anyway, did not seem put out. "Gail will do the singing," he remarked, "and Sid"—he referred to a somewhat shaky elderly tenor who had been rescued from practically permanent "resting," by the dearth of male entertainers over military age—"Sid will oblige with one of his 'Only' songs."

"What do you mean?" asked Gail. "'Only' songs?"

"'Only a rose!' . . . 'Only one kiss!' . . . 'I love you *only*!' . . . 'Only your eyes!' . . . It never alters!"

"Why should it?" demanded Gail.

"Quite! It's been Sid's whole life, hasn't it? '*Only* five pounds a week?' . . . '*Only* one song in the whole show?' . . . '*Only* five minutes for my whole act?' . . . '*Only* a bed-sitting-room, Mrs MacTavish?' Poor old Sid! I'll go and find him a whisky."

"No favouritism, Jack!" cried Nita, hurrying after him as he disappeared among the workshops.

II

Left to herself, Gail stood for some time longer looking out on this weirdest of theatres for a light musical leading lady to be playing in. . . . But then, how different in every way these first three years of the war had been from anything she had expected! She had not been bombed to bits in her London flat in the first fortnight as she had expected. Instead, nothing at all had happened. She had not been brought to beggary by the cessation of all entertainment. On the contrary, after the first few days of closed theatres, she had had more work offered her than ever before in her professional career, and had been able to stave off her creditors with morsels all round; though nobody would take her flat in the West End, and she was still responsible for the rent of it. After a first tour with Ensa, she had been given a part in a revue in London; then, when the blitz scattered the world of the theatre all over the country, she had done several spells of well-paid variety (for the war was making salaries rocket), and then been given the lead at three figures in an enormously successful touring entertainment entitled *Girls for Victory!* And this show (incredible as it may sound) was under the management of Fizz.

Theatrical quarrels for the most part pass like April showers, and when Gail called at All-Star House on the instructions of her agent Mr Stulitzer in the summer of 1941, she had been received by Bob

Forshaw with no apparent memory of the fiasco of *In Modern Mood*. Indeed, Bob had had plenty of other troubles since then to drive all recollection of that unfortunate musical from his mind. "Ee! I'm nobbut walkin' about to save t'Death Duties," he groaned in answer to her enquiries about his health. The outbreak of the war had caught him badly on the hop. Short as it was, the compulsory closing of the theatres had cost him severe losses in his capacity as head of "Bob Forshaw, Ltd." and "Forshaw and Grimwade." These he had sought to recover by compelling Fizz to throw on an expensive but ill-prepared show at the Stadion, in which Bobo Baggaley, as the star, was permitted to indulge her vanity by playing every kind of part for which she was unsuited. The flop was immediate, and in consequence Forshaw's hopes of bolstering up his minor organizations (devilishly pressed in the provinces by "Raymondy") with his profits from Fizz were disappointed, and—a further result over which he grieved less—Arthur Inman did finally and irrevocably decide to go out of the syndicate.

Small things determine great events, and the culminating cause of quarrel might seem to be one of these. In that feverish autumn of 1939, when everybody considered safety to lie in moving to some place other than the one in which they were, and troops of displaced school-children were being led to and fro over Britain, Forshaw came to Inman on the day of the dress rehearsal of the new Stadion show, and asked a favour. His small great-nephew had been put in his charge while passing through London to his school, which had been removed to some country spot. Would Inman object to the lad sitting in the stalls during the rehearsal until Forshaw was ready to take him to the station?

Inman could scarcely refuse at such a time, and gave an ungracious assent. "So long as he sits still and keeps quiet!" he growled.

For the first half-hour or so the boy, set down with a warning in the front row of the stalls, obeyed the strict orders given him; but then he began to fidget. First he started swinging his feet and kicking the panels of the orchestra pit, till Inman had to turn round on the stage and tell him to desist. After that he was seized with fits of shrill laughter whenever Whirter and Carr came on to do their comic stuff, which unnerved them by its unexpectedness. Hushed again into silence with threats, he then was observed hanging over the orchestra barrier and—horror of horrors!—exuberantly sucking a lemon. The brass was promptly liquidated, and the boy turned out of the stalls and told to wait for his uncle in the corridor.

He left plaintively protesting; only to reappear in a stage box a few minutes later, with a monocle in his eye and a long cigar alight in his mouth, kissing his hand with abandoned leers to the show-girls! . . .

Inman never spoke to Bob Forshaw again, and didn't even turn

up after the show on the first night to learn the verdict. He also wasted a great deal of money seeking the opinion of the most expensive counsel on the possibility of bringing an action for insulting behaviour against the midget, Ernie Wensley. Worst of all, he went out of Fizz, selling the whole of his shares to Zaleski, which made old Bob feel for the first time that the laugh was on the other side. However happy it might make him to see the last of Inman, it was a blow in the midriff to find Zaleski established in such a strong position against him in his own creation.

On top of all this when, in the summer of 1941, the blitz over London slackened and West End theatres became valuable property again, Bob Forshaw found himself out of the race. The Parthenope was still under lease to Zaleski (for Raymondy) and, as Londoners will remember, one of the very last of the raids left the Stadion a blackened ruin. No wonder it was a lined and harassed Bob Forshaw who, a week after this disaster, saw Gail about engaging her as leading lady in *Girls for Victory!* But he was as friendly and fatherly as he always was when getting an actress's salary down, and there was only one awkward aspect to the interview.

This was the unannounced entry of Monty Du Parc into Forshaw's office in the middle of it. To Gail, he, too, seemed to have felt the quickening tempo of the war, and to have aged. He was slightly stouter (in spite of rationing), a good deal more pompous, his complexion was duller, and something of the sheen and crinkle had gone from his hair, now slightly streaked with grey. He shot her a swift glance through his horn-rims, remarked casually, "How are you, Gail?" and then, with a mumbled apology to Forshaw, went over to a filing cabinet in the corner and began to pull out cards. He was listening keenly, however, to what went on, for at one point he turned his head and observed in a low voice, "You always said you wanted a *dancer* for the part, Bob!"

"Eh!" said Bob tetchily, "Gail can dance well enough for all she'll be asked to do!" Old Bob despised petty rancours and was not pleased, evidently, at Monty's intervention just when he was successfully pleading the difficulties of the times for paying Gail less than she was inclined to ask. Monty shortly afterwards left the room, but Gail felt that here at any rate was one feud not buried, and that she had better keep an eye open for Mr Du Parc.

Agreement had been reached nevertheless, though old Bob failed to beat her down below £125 a week, and she had gone out soon after with that audacious money-maker *Girls for Victory!* designed to give the tired service man all that it was supposed he wanted, no matter who might be shocked. She had only left that all-conquering show at the end of November to do another obligatory month of Ensa, and it was likely that after Christmas she would go back into it, as the girl who was taking her place was not giving satisfaction.

III

She was roused from her vague meditations on these and other matters by the sound of voices and feet trampling the grass of the hangar. The audience were coming in. In the dimness she could see the long lines of men in Air-force Blue, a little paler than the darkness, spreading out and seating themselves. The flying-crews, in readiness for immediate action, had the best of it, muffled to their ears in their flying-suits and lambs'-wool-lined boots, and swathed in rugs and blankets.

The officer in charge approached the stage and politely asked if the party were ready to begin. Jack asked if nothing better could be done in the way of lighting. The officer laughed and said it was a little too bad when these ladies had come all that way to entertain them that they should not be seen. He called some men, and a few more lamps were found and dragged into position to throw light on the stage, amid applause and cheering. Then the officer took his seat in the front row, and the eight girls opened the show with a dancing number.

At the end of this Jack came forward as compère for a few initiatory-gags. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, for he had discerned a line of Waafs at the back, "before we continue our programme, there is just one thing I should like to say in confidence, and that is——"

"The black-out in this camp is b——y awful!"

roared an immense voice over the Tannoy system; and promptly the few footlights and the extra lamps went out, leaving audience and artists lit only by the braziers and the stars glimmering through the open doors and dilapidated roof.

There was a roar of laughter from the front, and Miss Bobo Bagga-ley, who had just emerged from her "dressing-room" in the vilest of tempers, began to go hysterical. But the R.A.F. men, resourceful as ever, soon produced their torches and flashed them on the performers like miniature spotlights. This supplied enough illumination at any rate to enable the girls—always the big attraction of these shows—to do some more of their stuff in brassières and knickers. Their bare arms, legs, and torsos looked in this light like so much raw steak, and any one of them with a tendency to varicose veins might have been mistaken for a road-map.

Bobo Bagga-ley's turn came presently, and, soothed by a nip of whisky, she consented to appear and give the song she had made famous in camps all over England, "The Things I've Done for Ensa!"

As always, this was a hit from the word go! The vagaries of the lighting were forgotten after the first minute, as Bobo's voice ripped through the hangar like a steel-saw proclaiming:

*"And so the things I've done for Ensa
Don't compare with the things that Ensa's done for me!"*

*Our fun and games on gun-sites filled the troops with mad delight,
They said our songs and dances gave them stamina to fight,
But the R.A.F. all thought we were their "target for to-night,"
Oh, you'll never believe what Ensa's done for me!"*

As verse succeeded verse—each more certain than the last to have been blue-pencilled if the song had ever been shown in this form to Ensa Headquarters—the audience grew more and more excited. There were cheers, laughs, whistles, cat-calls, and volleys of clapping at the rawest points. To Jack Kelham, listening at the side, it seemed that many of the most boisterous noises came from a little knot of officers standing not far from the side. The men observed this behaviour, too, and kept giving sidelong glances and winks to one another. They seemed to get more unruly in their own laughs and shouted comments from the example set by their superiors.

"If the officers don't behave," growled old Sid the tenor to Jack at the side, "how can they expect the men to?"

IV

In one of the workshops, meanwhile, Gail had just kicked off her gum-boots and slipped on her golden shoes, and was now shiveringly removing her coat. She heard the uproar in front with a frown. She had to go on immediately after Bobo—a clumsy piece of programme-building—and the atmosphere that was being worked up was scarcely conducive to listening to a soprano singer's ballads and arias.

Suddenly she nearly jumped out of her skin. Outside the hangar a Spitfire had started up its engines to warm them in case of a sudden take-off. The roar when it ceased left her heart hammering. . . .

In a moment, although she tried to fight her thoughts, she was back in the autumn of 1940 in the middle of the blitz, playing a theatre near the dock-end of Liverpool. Again she heard the banshee wailing of the sirens through the stuffy wood and dark cloth black-out on her dressing-room windows—a noise she had grown to disregard. Again she heard the distant "poppings," as she used to call them, during her first song. Then—she was trembling now in the cold tool-room of the hangar, with its sickly atmosphere blent of fumes from the braziers, hot oil, and aeroplane fabric dope—then the noises grew suddenly louder; there was a series of shattering crashes from an A.A. gun on a neighbouring roof; the murmurs in front rose to hubbub; and (worst of all) she could see groups rising in disorder from the stalls and trying to force their way out.

She had been on the point of breaking off her song and making an appeal to the audience to stay seated when—it happened!

That disintegrating shock which, she thought, though she was never sure, had thrown her forward on to hands and knees, that noise like an angry giant's roar which had left her ears singing and deaf for seconds afterwards, the tinkle of the lamps falling from the flies all round her, the pitchy blackness filled with a foul chemical smell, the cries of fear . . . it was round her, all of it, now, suffocating her, making her shake like a jelly.

The bomb had not actually hit the theatre; but had dropped close enough for the blast to sweep across the stage and shatter the windows of the dome above the audience, causing some people cuts from broken glass. Quite impulsively she had clambered to her feet—yes, she must have been down—and cried through the confusion in her strong, clear singer's voice, "Ladies and Gentlemen, please keep your seats! If you will give us a minute to start the lights again, the show will go on!"

At that moment a dim light had flashed across the stage from a flood-lamp in the wings that the stage-manager, with resource and coolness, had contrived to get working again; and the sight of the slim girl standing steadfast in her pale dress in the middle of the devastated stage put a sudden check on the dangerous heave of the audience towards the doors. They paused, looked, hesitated; and as they did so Gail, coming down to the shattered footlights, told them like a hostess at a children's party. "Come, that's better! Now let's see you sit down again . . . they can't see me from the back, you know! . . . Come, customers! You're not going to be the first audience that ever walked out on me—are you?"

There was a nervous titter, merging in a laugh; then some of the men, ashamed of their moment of panic, began to settle back into their seats, and Gail, to drown the distant clangour of fire and ambulance bells, started her song again before her accompanist had time to crawl out from under the grand piano. . . . The show went on to the finish, when the manager, going to look for Gail to thank her, discovered her on the floor of her dressing-room in a dead faint.

V

How humiliating it was for her now in the hangar to have to own that she felt almost unable to go on. Her knees were cotton-wool; her throat constricted when she tried to open it. Ever since that night the burring and droning of planes overhead had pervaded her dreams, tormenting her slumbers; ever since that night she had been unable to look up at high ceilings and roofs; lamps and chandeliers impending over her made her want to duck her head and shoulders. . . . Then, penetrating the frantic applause and shouts of recall as Bobo finished, there came the level note of the "All clear!" and, shaking her hair back from her face, she went out to make her entrance.

As she came out on to the stage where two or three lamps had been

got going again, she made a sufficiently glamorous figure to gain a warm reception, though there were a few whistles and cries of a sort she resented—such greetings were usually kept for Bobo.

Jack Kelham began the prelude to "The Park Nobody Knows"; but the piano was unheard, the talk and laughter of the little group of officers near the front continuing. It seemed to Gail to be led by a single, strident voice. She braced herself and began to sing; but her first few bars were interrupted by a fresh explosion of merriment, led, it seemed to her, by the same dominating voice. She sang louder in an attempt to win attention, but it was in vain. The interruptions seemed to be levelled directly at her now, and one pair of hands kept ironically clapping every time she reached a high note.

This was too much. Gail stopped dead—to the surprise of Jack Kelham, long inured to barracking, who turned his head to see what was wrong. "Wait a minute, Jack!" she said, and walked to the corner on the side where the interrupters were. The sudden stopping of the song seemed to take them by surprise, for they stood silently looking at her.

"Gentlemen!" said Gail, "if gentlemen I am to call you! You are not required, I believe, by service regulations to listen to me. But if you do not wish to do so, may I ask you to leave the hangar, and allow your men to hear the show we have come a long way to give them? . . . I will start this song again."

Then with one of her beautiful bows she returned to the centre of the stage and sang her song through in a silence unbroken even by a cough or a shuffled foot. At the end the applause of the airmen was so deep and prolonged that it might seem an oblique censure on their officers for their misbehaviour. There were no more interruptions during the remainder of the show.

At the end the officer who came behind to invite the artists (as was customary) into the Mess for drinks was as charming and unruffled as usual. Indeed, he appeared to pay special attention to Gail as he escorted her across the air-field to the collection of huts fitted up with bars, rugs, arm-chairs, writing-tables, and all other feasible comforts for the Officers' Mess. Inside everybody was as polite and cheery as usual, and there were the normal compliments and gallantries with the women of the party, from which Gail was in no way excluded. She realized that there was to be no mention of the little disturbance over in the hangar, though she had an intuition that if she had not violated etiquette by rebuking the officers before the men, she would probably have had an apology—as it was she was having only politeness and hospitality. Well, that was O.K. by her; the drinks were good—and warming—and she decided to consider the incident closed.

But she could not help wondering which of the young men around her had been responsible for the "incident," which of them had been

the misguiding spirit; for she was sure there had been a leader, the man with the strident, defiant laugh. Was he one of those who kept superfluously inviting her to more drinks, though they could quite well see the unemptied glass in her hand? Or was he one of those who kept naïvely asking her what it felt like to face an audience on the stage? Or was he, maybe, one of those who, after introductions, had taken the first polite opportunity to retire into arm-chairs in corners or withdraw to the other end of the bar, talking among themselves or playing chess, or turning over illustrated papers?

It became a sort of guessing game. Was he that dark-chinned, slightly unkempt officer with the heavy moustache, sitting in a basket chair with his hands clasped behind his head, and his eyes fixed on the rafters of the hut, lost in some private dream? Or was he the restless, fair-haired boy, just giving his friends a waddling imitation of somebody—an unpopular superior, probably? He looked as if he had the cheek for it! Or was he the man in khaki with plum-coloured tabs, the shortest, most thick-set of those present? Gail caught glimpses of a small sandy moustache and a lean, hooked nose. But he did not seem in the least interested in her or her companions, and not long afterwards went out of the Mess. The party went on for some time with dancing, until, wearied out, the entertainers were bundled into their bus again, and the long, freezing drive back to the hostel began.

A fortnight more of these discomforts brought the Ensa tour to an end in Scotland. From Inverness Gail travelled back to London, standing all the way without food in an unheated corridor, watching the German officer prisoners of war lolling in their reserved first-class compartments. She stayed alone over Christmas in her flat, which the house agent, though now more vaguely hopeful, had still not succeeded in letting. Gail did not press him, feeling that with her present salary she need not be in a hurry to dispose of her home and beautiful furniture. But there was a letter from the Income Tax authorities that baffled and worried her very much by its menacing tone. Then, in the first days of January, she called at All-Star House in answer to a letter from Bob Forshaw.

She was kept in the dreary waiting-room downstairs and made to write down her business. Then, after a considerable wait, a secretary came down and said she was afraid there had been some mistake. Mr Forshaw would be away till the end of February, and Mr Du Parc, who was attending to his business in his absence, understood that there was to be no change in the cast of *Girls for Victory!* when it started out again this month. The secretary was sorry that Miss Darien had had the trouble of calling in the circumstances.

Gail thanked her, walked out of the building, found a telephone box, and rang up All-Star House, saying Mr Isidore Raymond wished to speak to Mr Forshaw personally. In a moment old Bob came on,

chuckled at her cheek, and promised that the contract should be sent off to her that day. It was; and when she had corrected an error of ten pounds a week ("a slip in the office," Mr Forshaw explained) she signed it and a fortnight later opened at Birmingham in *Girls for Victory!* again.

VI

The end of February brought her back to Blackpool, where she found the familiar scenes curiously unscathed by the tempest that was burning and wrecking England from end to end. Here were no demolished piers, wired-off esplanades, shattered marine terraces or closed theatres. True, the long front and the secretive back-streets went black at dusk, leaving only the sullen red eyes of the Tower on guard; true the big hotels now harboured the staffs of Ministries and their cups of tepid tea. But the town seemed as crowded as ever, if with a throng of different appearance. In place of the audacious sports jackets, beach-suits, and carnival headgear of peace-time had come khaki, with Navy and Air-force Blue, into which had gone half the girls also, acquiring a new-style beauty from the lines of their tailored uniforms and neat hair-dressing. No doubt, the ATS, struggling to adjust lips and complexion to the mud of khaki, might feel jealous of the Waafs in their light-blue, against which hair and buttons alike gleamed dazzlingly, while both might envy the black silk legs and saucy sailor-caps of the Wrens. It did not alter the fact that these trimly groomed figures imported a fresh romance into the national life, making the red-brick streets of the North as picturesque as a Viennese operetta. So that with this, and with all the theatres and ball-rooms packed to capacity, the gaiety of Blackpool at war showed very little eclipse of peace-time standards.

To Gail, however, there was an eerie feeling about dressing again in that room at the Palatine Gardens Theatre in which she had passed through such an emotional crisis; to be playing to audiences and to applause that seemed to belong to the ghostly past on that well-known stage. She was an immense success, especially with a new song in which she invited representatives of the different services to step up from the audience and dance with her in turn. She always had several calls after this number, and nearly always came off with a faint regret in her heart that the song had not been written by Peter. . . . But he was so far away now, as to seem almost another shadow out of her past.

He had seen her once during a short leave, and he wrote to her when he could. She knew he had served for some time as wireless operator on an auxiliary cruiser, been torpedoed, and in hospital with

pneumonia from exposure in the sea. Then last summer he had written from Alexandria, where he had been given a shore job, which left him, he told her, time for writing music. His evil contract with Melodeon had expired some time in 1940, but he had had no opportunity of making any contact with a fresh publisher, or indeed (until these last months) any time for thinking about such matters at all.

Girls for Victory! was staying a fortnight in Blackpool this visit, and it was one day during the second week, while Gail was resting with a cup of tea between the First and Second House, that the hall-keeper brought in a scrap of paper on which was written, "Captain A. Gilroy."

Gail frowned at it, twisting a ringlet of her long, freshly-shampooed hair in her fingers. She wanted to be left alone to rest between the two shows, and had sent Evie out to get her own tea. But probably this man was one of those friends from the Forces of whom she had accumulated such a heap by now, and none of whom she cared to disappoint of a smile and a few affectionate words when they came round to see her. Any one of them might be going out on the morrow to die in a commando raid, or in Africa or Burma, might indeed be destined to be shot down over Birmingham or over Berlin that very night! She certainly could not recall this Captain Gilroy; but then, it was impossible for her to remember the names of half her admirers, and so she decided to let him come in for a few minutes.

The hall-keeper withdrew with her message; and after a pause which, for some unaccountable reason, she felt to be both long and tense, an authoritative rap fell on her door, and almost before she could answer, it was opened, and there entered—the short, broad-set officer with the plum-coloured tabs of a paratrooper whom she had seen that night in the Mess at — Aerodrome.

Gail rose and looked at him enquiringly, and he gave her back her look from pale hazel eyes, at once whimsical and reckless, of which—she remembered now—she had caught a fleeting glimpse as he left the Mess soon after she arrived.

"Good evening!" he said at last, breaking the silence, for her bones had suddenly been turned to water under those lightly mocking eyes. "Is it possible you don't recognize me, Miss Darien?"

"Ye-es," she got out with an effort. "I think I saw you——"

"Think, be d——d!" he answered with a crooked smile under his thin beak of a nose, a warm, challenging smile, contradicting the roughness of his words and making her go hot all over. "You *know* you remember me very well! Didn't you tick me off, before my own men, as if you were a Colonel or a bally Brigadier?"

She stiffened with a strong effort. "So you were one of the fellows making that ungentlemanly scene, were you?" she asked.

"The loudest! . . . Actually I kept the other chaps up to it!" he retorted, his eyes at once mischievous and pleading. "So what?"

"Nothing," she answered, turning to her dressing-table. "Unless you've come to apologize, Captain . . . though it's a bit late for that."

"I'd have apologized there and then if you hadn't made me look a fool before my own men! I couldn't stand for that, you know!"

"How interesting! . . . But since you don't seem to have come to say you're sorry now——"

"But I am! . . . I was rude . . . and I was a fool! I've just been in front at your show, and I was good, wasn't I? I clapped my hands off! I must have been plumb crazy ever to interrupt a voice like yours, Miss Darien; but then, you see, that night at the camp I was blotto . . . sozzled . . . I didn't know a thing I was doing . . . except that I was furious——"

"Because I ticked you off before your own men!" Gail gurgled into a laugh. "Come! Let's call it a day! Sit down, Captain Gilroy!"

"May it be Alex, please?" he asked, again with that mixture of roguishness and pleading child. "I'm sure you haven't many surnames among your friends . . . or, if you have, they're the ones you don't care much about. Now, I don't want to volunteer for *that* battalion! I'd rather you hated me like a bad smell than be 'Captain Gilroy' to you!"

Gail laughed again. "Sit down, then, Alex! Have a whisky?"

"Just what I feel bound on medical grounds to refuse!" He watched her while she took the bottle from its hiding-place among her hanging dresses—it was a thirsty company—and poured out. "You can make it a little bigger without positively killing me!" he remarked. "I know you're one of these generous girls!"

"Staying long in Blackpool, Alex?" she asked, passing him the whisky.

"Bung-ho! . . . I won't have another, thank you," he handed her back the glass, "unless it's a very small double. . . . Am I staying long in this place? I've got fourteen days' leave—or is it nine? D——d if I can ever remember! Anyhow, while it lasts, I'm out to have the best of everything. So, where do we go from here, Gail?"

"You go out in five minutes, so that I can get ready for my first scene."

"Okedoke! I go out and book a table for us two after the show at the Baronial. What a frightful place! Just like the nightmares one used to have as a kid on Christmas night after getting hold of the brandy-bottle they'd used for the plum-pudding."

"Horrible child you must have been! And you've not improved—much! . . . What's that ribbon?" She touched him lightly on the breast with a finger-tip and felt a thrill go through her.

"I'll tell you the tale of one of the bravest feats of the war at supper. It was such a crazy bit of daring that it was really too bad they gave me the decoration instead of the man who did it. Good wangling, however!"

"I don't believe a word of that, Alex!"

"You will after supper!"

"And who says I'm having supper with you, Alex?"

"You do! Because you want to dance with me afterwards!" Abruptly he reddened, and a blaze of anger flashed through his hazel eyes. "Oh, you can cut that part, if you don't care for dancing!" he snapped. Involuntarily she had measured his shortness against her willowy length with her eye. He recovered himself and smiled again in that disintegrating way.

Gail turned to her mirror and touched up her mouth with her finger. She wished her heart would not beat in this silly way.

"I'll call for you when your second show is over," he told her.

"I haven't said so," she retorted crisply.

"What's eating you? You must surely realize that if there's one man on this earth you can feel perfectly safe with, it isn't me?"

"So sure?" she asked, turning from the glass and trying with a cold glance to measure his impudence. But it was rather a failure, and she turned back quickly to take refuge behind her powder-puff.

"'And put him in his place!'" soliloquized Alex, puffing at a cigarette and lolling back with his eyes on the ceiling. "'He's too sure of himself for words, my dear!'"

"Stop it, you idiot!"

"I love that gurgle of yours!" They both laughed together. "So that's a date, eh?"

"I suppose so, if there's no other way of getting rid of you. . . . Ah, here's Evie! . . . Evie, meet the shyest boy in the British Army!"

"You win!" laughed Alex. "I'll be seeing you!" and he clattered away down the stone passage, fitting his beret on to his straw-coloured, slightly curling hair.

"Well, I never did!" pronounced Evie. But even at forty-something there was a corner of her eye that suggested this was not wholly true.

VII

"Do look where you're driving sometimes and not at me, Alex!" pleaded Gail. It was the next morning, and they were in Captain Gilroy's borrowed racing car speeding North along country roads far beyond Blackpool.

"What's eating you?" he asked. "Oh, get off the road, you d——d fool!" He sounded his horn violently.

The driver in front of them nearly obeyed his instruction, for as Gail twisted round in the open car to peer through the wind that was blowing the ends of her scarf straight out from her neck behind, she saw him slewed round with his front wheels almost in the ditch. "What's the big idea?" she demanded of Alex, as the car behind

dwindled to a toy and then vanished behind a rise. "Are you trying to dodge the column and finish the war in plaster?"

"Not a bad notion!" he replied coolly, making the little car leap forward until it seemed to Gail as if the wheels were clean off the road.

"You're worse than the Giant Plunger!" she laughed.

"Well, as my proximity doesn't seem enough by itself to excite you——"

"Don't look at me! Look at the road!"

"Are you fright, Gail Darien?"

"Not a bit!" she gurgled, nestling into the collar of her fur coat against the whistling wind. "I seem doomed to be carted around by maniac drivers!" She fell into sudden reverie with her great eyes wide and unseeing.

He glanced at her jealously. "Snap out of your murky!" he commanded. "Who was this guy, anyway?"

"A better driver than you!" she teased him, coming to herself with a shiver.

"Why, what's wrong with my driving?"

"Only that I hate stepping into a car at Blackpool and shutting the door in Fleetwood!"

"We've passed Fleetwood, haven't we?"

"I wouldn't know. . . . Nor would you! . . . Alex, where are we going?"

"Search me! I look to you for the gen about these parts. Begins to look a little like the far-famed Lake District, doesn't it?" He changed gears with a jerk, and the little car shot up a steep road lined with rocks and trees.

"Alex, we must turn back soon. Yes, really! I've got——"

"You've got a show! I was waiting for it! All you pros are haunted day and night by the fear of being late for your precious shows! D——d seriously you take yourselves, I must say!"

"That's rude! Even if I hadn't a show, I wouldn't fancy being driven by you after dark, I can tell you!"

"S all right! I'm particularly careful about the way I drive this car after dark!"

"That's your story, soldier!"

"No! Straight! I have to be. The lights conked out on Monday, and I keep forgetting to have 'em serviced."

"Then it would be wilful murder!"

"Lovely womanslaughter is the verdict!"

"Alex! Put that arm somewhere else, if you don't want both hands for driving. . . . Alex, do you hear?" Her breath came in short pants, and her knees quivered under the rug—and she hated herself for both these things.

"What do you say? I can't hear!" he shouted, and slowed the car down until it stopped on the summit of a high road with a cliff climb-

ing above it on one side and a woody slope running down to a gorge below. In the silence as he stopped the engine the voice of the stream came brawling up to them.

"I said take that arm away! And you don't have to stop the engine to do it, either."

He removed his arm from her shoulders, and flung open the door on his side. "Shall we take a stroll?" he said. "Come to the edge, and let's have a look at the river!"

She got out slowly on her side, feeling her limbs moved by an impulse she could not fight. Never in her life had she been strung to such a pitch of flaming excitement. The keen mountain air nipped and stung, whipping her senses to a still tenser exhilaration; the sparkling sky of the Northern winter shone like a festal canopy above the leafless tree-tops. Gail's legs trembled as she stepped off the road on to the couch of frozen mould and dead leaves that led downwards between the stripped trunks towards the louder and louder chant of the stream. She could feel Alex just behind her, hear his loose, heavy tread scattering the leaves.

Downward they moved, away from the road, which was soon hidden behind them by the slender interlacing trunks and stems. Gail felt a dizziness in her head; she hardly knew how to plant her feet on the rough slope over which she was moving. Yet her senses seemed miraculously alive to every object around her; the grey bark and vivid green lichen on the trees, the pale patches of sun on the soil, the flashes of blue amid the tracery overhead, the plashing of the river and the cold smell of the wintry wood had an acuteness that transformed them into a country of marvel. To still her trembling fingers she pretended to be straightening her skirt round her waist. . . . When Alex took her in his arms, coming on her from behind with a surprising gentleness, flames seemed to rise in her and course through her body with an incredible ecstasy. . . .

VIII

"Hell! We'll never get through to the bar!" grumbled Alexander Gilroy on the following Saturday evening to a fat young R.A.F. officer, as they came up the stair from the street into the throng at the end of the Tower Ball-room. The place seemed even more tightly packed, more gay, more palpitating with life than it had been in peace-time. If war economy had imposed a dimming of the crystalline lights, if the girls' dresses were less ornamental and their shoes showed signs of deterioration, the pageantry of the uniforms and the sense of hurried, pressed emotion made amends for that. The air tingled with the electricity of sex and partings. Alex turned to his friend and laughed, his pale eyes flaring. "Shall we try an exercise?" he asked. "Advance in open order and scatter 'em?"

"You be a little gentleman, Alex!" warned his friend, Bill Bright, in peace-time a house agent, now an Intelligence Officer in the R.A.F. "Start nothing!"

Gilroy grinned. "Not yet!" he agreed. "I want some drinks before I go to pick up Gail. . . . You haven't met her, by the way, have you? Come round to her room with me later, if you've nothing more exciting to do!"

"Pleasure!" answered Bill Bright. "Pouf! What a heat! . . . Stop here a minute, Alex! It's really rather wonderful, you know!"

They had worked their way to the front row of the "paddock," from which now arose a loud outburst of applause as Ena Baga, in the majesty of her long white-and-gold gown, appeared upon the stage and mounted the console of the great Wurlitzer organ. Enthroned there in an aureole of tinted lights, high above the heads of the people, she might have been the priestess of some colossal temple. With delicate fingering she sent out the soft waves of her signature tune, subduing the mighty instrument to a tone of reverie. Then, as she opened to a full-mouthed diapason, the elated worshippers streamed forth upon the floor, blending the swish of hundreds of feet with the rhythmical swell and throb that poured through the vast hall.

Alex Gilroy dug an impatient elbow into his friend's ribs. "Come along to the bar now! Take the chance, you sap!" The corridors had in fact been almost emptied by the number of couples who had crowded on to the floor for the twenty minutes that was to them the crown of the evening. Everybody wished to yield themselves to the favourite music of the modern age, to the austere church instrument transformed, like a nun turned dancer, into an expression of the many-coloured joys of life. They gave themselves to the ripple and surge of the pipes, intoxicating their profoundest being; to the muttered thunders hinting at the storms of passion; to the sudden drums giving a leap to their pulses; to the ethereal voice of the Dulciana, the silvery romance of the Chimes and Glockenspiel. Enthusiastic clapping went up whenever the music paused, and the dark-haired priestess raised her arm in graceful acknowledgment . . . then the music flowed out with renewed power.

But Alex Gilroy wanted a drink, and so his friend resignedly followed him through the cropped male heads above uniform collars and the elaborate shoulder-length sets of curls which the war had brought in with the disuse of women's hats. Two Army Redcaps passed, silent and unobtrusive, along the pillared corridor fronting the dance floor; an R.A.F. policeman, with a band on his arm, paused a moment at the foot of the stair leading to the galleries; patrolling the Long Bar, three Yankee "Snow Drops," with their slouching movements and the sinister-looking clubs swinging from their wrists, brought a whiff of Chicago into the homely English scene.

Alex Gilroy glided in between two groups at the crowded bar and smiled round. In a moment three girls were on the spot to serve him.

"Two of you would be enough really!" he grinned. "But thanks all the same! A nice double whisky for me, and a single gin and tonic for this poor soul!"

Bill Bright chuckled. "How *do* you do it, Alex?" he demanded, as they withdrew with the drinks to a small table momentarily vacated. "You're an ugly little devil really, and yet——"

"It was granted me to make up for my ugliness!" answered Alex. "Mud in your eye!" He swallowed his whisky in a gulp, and looked back towards the bar. "You care to lead the attacking party this time?" he enquired.

"You wait!" said Bill calmly, sipping his gin with plenty of tonic. "In fact, you've had more than enough already. What will your girl-friend think?"

"Gail, thank God, has got beyond thinking where little Alex is concerned. Why, she'd drop her show and follow me anywhere over the country if I just did that!" He crooked his little finger. "Oh, she's taken the knock-out drops, has little Gail! No girl's much use till she has . . . at any rate to me." He felt in his pockets for cigarettes.

Bill sipped and regarded him. "You know, Alex, you're one of the grandest chaps God ever made."

"Sweet of you to say so, Padre!"

"And one of the biggest cads!"

"*Mr Bright!* . . . Give me a light!"

"I mean with women."

"Oh, *that* all? . . . Hardly applies, does it?" He leaned over with his cigarette between his lips, defined in their thinness beneath his slight moustache as Bill's lighter flickered into action.

"You know very well," said the R.A.F. man, "that you've deliberately driven this girl . . . who seems a decent girl, by all you say . . . crazy about you. You're trying to make her give up her job so as to be on hand for you whenever you want her! . . . When you finally decide to make your jump, what'll become of her?"

"Enquire elsewhere! I'm not a Lost Property Office!"

"You son of a ——"

"Platoon Sergeant's the polite phrase now. . . . I can't help it if I am just that. It's me . . . and they seem to like it!"

"God help 'em, the poor little fools, they do! O.K., Alex, not another word from me! You're a forbearing guy to stand as much as you have."

"I kinda like you, Bill. You looked so damn funny when you were pulling me out from under that blazing beam the night Jerry pranged the Briefing Room. It was a wizard aim. I'd have liked to stand that chap a drink."

"Why, you d——d fool, it was *you* hauled *me* out with my clothes on fire . . . and it wasn't funny at all!"

"You didn't see your face! Come on! Let's get cracking! This is my last night at Blackpool . . . and I mean to make the most of it."

"Where are we going?"

"To take Gail to supper, if you like. You can pay."

"Delighted! But I should have thought on your last night——"

"That's why. I don't want too protracted farewells."

"Platoon Sergeant!"

"Sure! . . . Don't go that way, Bill! I want to call in on 'em at the Ball-room again first."

He led the way back, pushing with the gentlest apologies through the corridor to the pillar nearest the orchestra platform. The band could be heard loudly from here, the thud of the drums penetrating the shuffle of the dancing feet. Alex stooped for a moment and hollowed his hands like a man who seeks to light a cigarette in a high wind.

"What the devil——?" began Bill, but the next moment Alex had sprung to tiptoe and flung something that emitted a trail of blue smoke over the dancers' heads. It exploded with a flash and a bang that produced a recoil of terror on the floor. There were cries and shrieks; the Master of Ceremonies could be heard shouting; the bandmaster smartly rallied his musicians.

Bill Bright felt himself firmly propelled by his elbow up the near-by stairs and out of sight round a turning. "You d——d fool!" he hissed. "What a silly game!"

"Stroll, will you? *Stroll!*" replied Alex, as they reached the first balcony, still in a hubbub, with people leaning over to see what had happened on the floor. "The Redcaps will search downstairs first—naturally; but any undue appearance of haste even up here might lead to unworthy suspicions."

"You idiot!" said Bill. "You might have blinded a dozen people . . . and caused a panic!"

"Oh, I think better of them," replied Alex smoothly. "It just gave a fillip to their Saturday night . . . so many gallant youths consoling trembling beauty with kisses! . . . And in a sort of way, Bill, you see, they'll remember me in Blackpool now."

CHAPTER TWO

I

As soon as the letter was given to her, Gail knew it was from Alex. The hall-keeper had passed it through the window of his hutch as she came out from rehearsal in an historic theatre of the Five Towns. Below the high red-brick side-wall of the building, she stood for a moment outside the stage-door, looking at the envelope.

Although she had never yet had a letter from Alex, she knew that this must be his hand—this large, fantastic, yet clear writing that sprawled all over the buff envelope. And suddenly, in the dim sunshine of the June day filtering through the smoke canopy of the Potteries, her heart lifted. She had been expecting a dull week. The *Girls for Victory!* company contained few sympathetic spirits apart from Jack Kelham and his wife, and they would not have been there but for Gail. When the travelling manager fell ill a fortnight before at Derby and there were agitated telephonic communications with London, it was she who had suggested Jack Kelham's name to the flurried assistant left in charge, and it had been approved at All-Star House. But Jack and Nita were not the persons for all moods, and Gail's lodgings were far from being a home from home.

They were in one of the better residential streets, in a typical castellated villa with lavatory glass in most of its windows, lifted on an embanked strip of lawn faced with scarlet bricks. Within, a hire-purchase warehouse seemed to have discharged its contents pell-mell into her sitting-room. A multiplicity of gilt or carved-wood mirrors reflected the apricot-plush curtains and the brass-studded arm-chairs of green leather. The walls were lined by glass cabinets displaying harlequin tea-pots and gold-edged plates of floral design, bright from the local factories. On the cabinet tops and on every table statuettes were posed—bronze Amazons, lank nudes in chromium strips, simplifying Victorian maids with parasols. The dining-table and chairs with their wriggly legs were ultra-Jacobean; the electric fitments looked like hanging spittoons in pastel colours.

No; it was not homely after Gail's London flat, especially as the owners—two sisters and an elderly, lean brother, who ran the place between them—seemed to regard themselves as curators of an immensely valuable museum, and only waited for Gail to go out in the morning to swoop down upon the sanctuary with Electrolux, feather brush, dusters, disinfectant sprays against the odour of her breakfast cigarette, and every other conceivable apparatus for abolishing the pollution of her presence. And if she dared to return before evening! . . .

So Gail did not now board a bus to take her back to "Avalon"; but instead, neglecting lunch, wandered in quest of some retired spot fit for reading a love-letter. She paid no heed, as she walked uphill to the streets of blackening red brick that shut her in, to the shop-windows crammed with gaudy wares and violent-coloured fabrics, to the vital population of the Five Towns thronging the pavements—the short, rugged, hollow-cheeked male operatives, the broad-faced, fair-haired girls with their tilted noses, alight in every step with joy and energy.

At length she found herself on a ridge topped by a curve of small villas, overlooking the fuming crater of the Potteries. From some such point had Kate Ede regarded the same view sixty years before her—but Gail knew nothing of George Moore's heroine. She gave scarcely a passing glance to the great smoke-curtain through which the Towns showed like a misty lake of red-and-black tints. The tawny pyramids of the slag rose from this dim surface as isolated peaks or miniature mountain ranges, romantic in shadow and contour. Behind and around them the giant spider-web of wheels and iron chutes, the dusky crimson pillars of the factory chimneys, each with its plume of white smoke gleaming for a moment as it curled to fade into the general stain, the crude yellow brick of the clustering, bottle-necked ovens, appeared and disappeared in the ever-shifting light. A dull heat fell from the thick irradiations of the sun, imprisoned in the overhanging cloud; pale-red distances trembled where the fringe of smoke dissolved; and the wooded hills that framed the view were flecked with the white-washed walls of old country-houses.

Blind to this grandiose and haunting vision, this magic play of atmosphere and colour tirelessly renewing itself for the delight of an artist's eye, Gail seated herself on a patch of waste grass and read Alex's letter. It contained both sweet and bitter. The bitter was that he was due to be flown "overseas" at the end of the present week. It gave her a choking pain to realize that he was going—going into that distant circle of peril which had so far been only a word for her. He might never return . . . no, she could not, would not believe anything so ghastly! The sweet was that he begged her to come down for two or three days to stay at an hotel in the town near the Midland aerodrome where he was stationed and give him a farewell meeting. Ah! how she longed to go, to jump into a train this very night, to lie in his arms again before the parting!

But how could it be done? With tightening anguish she realized the impossibility of it. She was the leading lady of this touring show; she could not, at her sweet will, leave it for two or three nights to join her lover. Jack Kelham, the manager, was her friend, no doubt, and owed his job to her. But he dare not connive at such truancy; it would mean professional ruin.

Yet go she must! Somehow, the thing would have to be arranged.

A doctor's certificate! That was the obvious solution! Yes, but not such a simple one! What plea could she put forward to any passably conscientious medical man to get off playing her part this week? She was as well as ever in her life; she had not even a shadow of hoarseness, the faintest trace of a cold. . . . She could try, of course. She could ask at the stage-door for the address of the "theatre doctor," but she did not know what sort of man he would turn out to be, whether he would prove a type that could be by any means cajoled . . . and how unbearable would be the blow to her dignity if he brusquely dismissed her complaint as frivolous. She was ashamed to be detected in this thing, even though she had lost the ability to be ashamed of doing it.

Suddenly, as by a jagged streak of lightning, the way was made plain to her. . . . Dr Swing! . . . He would do anything for her—or would he? He was always greasily flattering, senilely amorous. . . . But there was a disquieting glint all the same at the back of those pin-point eyes. Still, Dr Swing was, all things considered, her one hope. He was still practising, so far as she knew, in the vicinity of Blackpool. She must contact him by telephone at once, and ask him to see her to-morrow morning. By taking the earliest possible train she should be able to visit him, coax or tear the precious certificate from him, and get back in time to present it before the first house.

She bought a railway time-table at the first shop she came to and verified this impression. Then in the square before the Town Hall she found a telephone box and passed an agitated quarter of an hour, searching for coins, consulting "Enquiries," and at last, after what seemed an endless humming silence, heard the diminished voice of Dr Swing, oddly professional and precise over the telephone, unemotionally making an appointment for eleven the next morning.

That was done, then, and Gail stepped blithely out of the box—on to the toes almost of Jack Kelham and Nita.

"Hulloa, Gail!" said Jack, who was carrying a large package of gramophone records. "How are you?"

She was on the point of replying "Fine!" when she remembered the part she had to play, and coughed . . . not too convincingly for an actress of her training. "I've a bit of a throat," she explained as they stared at her, "and I don't like it. I've been sucking jujubes all day."

"When did it come on?" asked Nita curiously. "You were in splendid voice at rehearsal this morning!"

"You're not thinking," said Jack, professionally anxious on the instant, "of stopping off, are you?"

"I don't *want* to," answered Gail, "and I'll try to get through to-night. But I *am* rather worried about getting wool on the high notes."

She was watching Jack narrowly, and his troubled expression was as good as an audience to her. "I hope," she went on, "it's not going

to be like that time in Sunderland when I gave a great croak in the middle of the plug-number——”

“Good G——!” exclaimed Jack.

“And then faded out completely!” Gail said tragically.

“I think I’d better call an understudy rehearsal,” mused Jack.

“Oh, don’t get jittery!” Nita interjected. She had been watching Gail’s face as narrowly as Gail had been watching Jack’s. “I know, Gail dear, you singers are right to be fussy, and to take precautions and all that, but I don’t believe there’s anything wrong with your voice. I only wish I had it!”

“I only wish you had my throat, then, and see how you liked that!” retorted Gail, walking on without looking at her, a red spot in her cheeks.

“An understudy rehearsal would do no harm,” insisted Jack.

Gail stopped outside a chemist’s. “I’ll go in and get a spray here,” she said. “It may help. See you at the theatre!”

“Jack!” said Nita with a drawn forehead, as they resumed their stroll towards their lodgings, “do be careful!”

“Of these records, ducks? I’ve got ’em all right.”

“No! Of that girl! There’s nothing at all wrong with her voice.”

“Oh, but there must be, or she wouldn’t say. You don’t doubt her, do you?”

For a moment Nita wanted to kiss the honest face turned so unsuspectingly towards her. But she had long ago resigned herself to the fact that if their precarious little barque was to weather the storms of their difficult and treacherous profession, it could not be her privilege to say the pleasant things. So she just shrugged her shoulders.

“Gail,” asserted Jack, “wouldn’t play one up! She’s not that sort of a girl!”

“Every woman’s been that sort of a girl some time. I’m sure I have,” replied Nita gloomily. “All I say is, look out! If she tries any skrimshanking, you’re for it, you know!”

“Nita, my darling, I haven’t been in the profession over twenty years for nothing!”

“N-o-o! But for next to nothing! Else we’d be better off now, wouldn’t we? Have it your own way, but don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

II

Gail arrived a little out of breath at the small, grey-brick surgery on the outskirts of the little town, with “Dr Edward Swing” on a brass plate upon the iron gate. There were no other patients waiting, and she was shown into the consulting-room at once by the fat, not over-

clean, woman who apparently acted both as the Doctor's cook and his receptionist.

Dr Swing rose from a swivel-chair in front of his desk to greet her. "How are you, Gail?" he asked. "Have a whisky?"

"Prescription first?" She forced a laugh. "But I will: it's very welcome!"

He laughed too as he unlocked a cupboard and took out the bottle. With hands that she noted distastefully were very dirty, he found a tumbler for her on a shelf and selected a graduated medical glass for himself. "Afraid I've no soda!" he murmured, "and I'm sure you don't take water in it. . . . Here's how!"

Gail could not restrain a faint grimace at the strength of her allowance. But this seemed to fortify Dr Swing. He sat down with a deep sigh, wiped his straggly moustache, and then asked in a professional voice, "Well, my dear, what can I do for you? Nothing seriously wrong, I hope?"

Gail hesitated. Should she make a clean breast of it, or try to swing the lead? "It's my throat," she began slowly. "It's been quite painful lately and I've had a good deal of hoarseness. I've been wondering whether I'm really fit to sing."

"I see." He sat staring at her through his dark specks of eyes, his hands on his fat knees. Abruptly he seemed disagreeable, almost formidable, to her. Hitherto she had regarded the shambling creature with a sort of half-pity. With the easy indulgence of her profession she had given him the entrée to her dressing-room, so long as there were others present, and had been amused by his clumsy compliments. But then, it flashed across her mind, she had never been in the position of having to appeal to him. He had given her a prescription or two, but never would she have dreamed of consulting Dr Swing if she had been seriously ill.

"The throat—eh?" he repeated. "Then we'd better take a look at it." He rose and took a small electric pencil from the desk, which he began to test. It flickered and was evidently out of order.

"I hope," she said with a nervous giggle, "you don't mean to stuff that thing down my throat?"

He smiled vaguely, still fidgeting with the torch. "No," he answered, "just inside your mouth, to help me s-see what's wrong down there."

"I don't suppose there's anything much to see," she replied irritably. "It's what I feel! Can't you take my word for it? I know I shall be sick or something if you start prodding me about with that thing. . . . That wouldn't help, would it?"

He laid the instrument down on his desk and seated himself in the swivel-chair again. "If you don't want to be examined, what did you come here to consult me for, my dear?" Absent-mindedly he poured himself out another stiff whisky.

"Look, Doctor!" said Gail, crossing one leg over the other, for-

getful how enticing they looked under her short cloth skirt, even in war-time stockings. "It's very simple really. I'm not pretending there's anything agonizingly wrong with my throat. But I know . . . I've learnt it from years of experience . . . that if I go on singing after these irritations and sore feelings, then in a day or two my voice goes . . . and it may take weeks to get it back. But in my profession they're so fussy and suspicious they demand a medical certificate before they let you stay off for a single performance. So I hoped you might—er—help me out—without a lot of formalities."

"What made you come all this way to me? There are heaps of doctors, surely, in the Five Towns?"

"Well, I really didn't expect you'd blame me for that, Doctor! I came to you, because—well, you're a friend—and I—I had confidence in you!"

"I see," he said drily. "But not enough confidence, it seems, to let me examine your throat! . . . What happens if you go off on your little joy-ride without a medical certificate?"

"Who said I was going off on a joy-ride?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, my dear, it's really rather obvious! But why drag *me* in, Gail?"

"Look, Doctor, aren't you being just a little awkward. I'm sure this sort of thing is done hundreds of times and nobody is ever found out!"

He shook his head. "It's a big professional risk for me," he said.

Gail stood up exasperatedly. "Oh, well, if you don't want to be helpful, I'd better be getting back at once."

"Wait a minute, my dear!" he said. "Don't get in a flat spin! Have another whisky! . . . No? . . . Then I will! . . . I haven't said, you know, that I won't give you a certificate, if I can find a good reason. . . . S-sit down and let's talk it over . . . qu-quietly! Come, have a small one!"

She thought it better not to refuse again. . . . She could see he was getting a bit tipsy. . . . If that would make him more amenable! . . . She mustn't . . . she couldn't . . . let Alex down; her veins were on fire with longing for him!

The raw spirit seemed to burn its way through her, and her head felt heavy and troubled. She tried to clear it by fixing a lucid attention on the stopped clock and tattered almanack upon the mantel-shelf behind Dr Swing's chair, on the blue roofs, harsh in the sunshine, that could be seen above the fly-spotted muslin curtains of the window.

"Well," said Dr Swing, and his voice reverberated in her ears, "I can't believe there's much wrong with your throat; but to me you show every s-s-symptom of a general de-debilitation. Your p-pulse is very poor!" ("He hasn't even taken it!" thought Gail.) "I consider you need a thorough examination . . . thorough examination." He rose

from his chair, and with an unsteady foot pushed a frowsy horse-hair couch forward from the wall.

"What are you doing?" cried Gail angrily. "I don't need to be examined, and if I did, I should want a nurse to be present!"

Dr Swing was pulling a screen round the couch. "It will be quite all ri," he said. "We're absolutely private here!" He went over and locked the door. "Housekeeper apt to blunder in at delicate momen's," he explained with a giggle.

"Unlock that door at once!" she cried.

"Certainly!" He turned the key again. "As you wish! But no examination, no certificate!"

Gail covered her face with her hands and cried like a little girl. . . .

"Jack!" said Nita Kelham, looking over her husband's shoulder at the certificate which Evie had brought to the theatre scarcely half an hour before the time of ringing-up. It gave Dr Swing's opinion that it would be highly prejudicial for Miss Darien to sing or appear upon the stage for the rest of that week, owing to a badly ulcerated throat and disturbing chest symptoms. "Jack," repeated Nita, "go down to her digs and enquire!"

"Evie said she was sleeping. The Doctor told her to rest as much as she possibly could. She went straight to bed when she got back."

"All the same, it's your duty to find out for yourself!"

"I've got enough on my hands up here, haven't I? Seeing that the understudy gets through! If there was anything in what you keep hinting. . . . Lord knows why you have your knife in Gail, since it was she got me this job . . . well, I'm covered by this certificate, aren't I!"

"There are certificates and certificates . . . and doctors and doctors, as you know, Jack! Why did she need to go all that way to consult this man, if she was feeling so rotten as she says?"

"Well, he's always been a sort of friend of hers."

"Makes it all the more nifty in my opinion! If you won't go, I will!"

"As good as calling her a liar!"

"I couldn't care less! I'd just love a row with Gail Darien! It's time she was told where she gets off!"

"Thank you! As if I hadn't enough rows to cope with, Nita, without you and my leading lady pulling each other's hair out. Don't be absurd, but stand by to help me prompt the understudy!"

III

The roadhouse was a good twenty miles from Alex's camp, and one or two more from the town where he had put Gail up, but it was the

most popular resort of the young officers and their girl-friends from the neighbourhood. It had once been the barn of a farm-house, but had been skilfully converted to shut out draughts, floored with parquet, furnished with central heating, provided with cloak-rooms, bars, and a band-platform, and lit by tubular electrics running along the rim of the humorous frieze below the beams, which showed a procession of eager guests approaching the place. Motorists in every type of car, cyclists, horse-drawn buggies, riders in hunting pink, and hikers as deliriously grotesque as a Frank Randle impersonation came scurrying one upon the other's tracks towards the signboard. In their zeal they suffered every kind of catastrophe—cars crumpled to smithereens, pedestrians plunged into scummy pools—but they held on their way to the Barn, with its brightly coloured walls, its gay chintzes and chromium-fitted lounges. One great advantage, too, the Barn had in war-time: being windowless, it was little trouble to black out.

It was the last night of Gail's stolen visit to her lover. To-morrow, Saturday (though the certificate covered that too) she meant to rejoin the Company, and go on with it to Birmingham on Sunday. To-morrow, soon after dawn, Alex must be on the air-field ready to be flown with two other officers to the units they had been posted to in Africa. No excuse would be accepted if he were not present: it would mean a court martial. In strictness he should not even have been at the Barn to-night. He should have attended the briefing for the journey and gone to bed in reasonable time. But the pilot who was to take them was a pal and a good sort, and he had consented to reply "All present" at the briefing on behalf of his crew and passengers, although Alex would already have started for his last night's enjoyment with Gail.

The drive to the Barn through the summer evening had seemed to her like a dream. Not only the road, and the dim, solemn woods that drew in from time to time to line it, not only the half-moon that with the fading day brightened its light on the way as the car whirled along with only its side-lights glowing according to black-out regulations, the whole of the past three days and nights, with their ferment of passion, and romance, pain and ecstasy, fun and craziness, seemed unreal, something to be awakened from with a stunning shock. . . . But Gail would not think about that!

A good four-piece orchestra was playing as they entered the rustic ball-room, and there were a number of couples already on the floor. Gail was quite ready to join them at once. Alex, in spite of his shortness and thickness (perhaps because of them), had taken pains to make himself an excellent dancer; Gail's early mistake on that point had long since been corrected; and even if he were a less perfect partner, what had she come for to-night but to dance . . . to dance and forget until the first streaks of dawn that Alex was going to be torn from her?

But she knew, and was resigned to it, that he would not start dancing until he had had a drink . . . or, if he should happen on friends in the bar, more than one. So she accompanied him thither, where they saw Bill Bright, trim, pleasant, and amazingly uninteresting, leaning on his light-blue elbow while he slowly enjoyed a simple beer.

"I knew you were here!" Alex challenged him. "I saw your filthy old bus in the park blocking up all the way. I thought we'd have to go under it. . . . What are you having?"

"Thanks, I've got——"

"No! Have a *drink!* Barman, three double whiskies! . . . Well, so this is our last night together this trip, we three! . . . Happy landings! And may the Lord have the good taste to preserve us! . . . Barman! Same again!"

"Alex!" pleaded Gail. "Aren't we going to dance first?"

"First, last, and all the time in between! These don't count! Just a pipe-opener! . . . Hulloo, Dick!" He signalled to a Tank Corps officer at the far end of the bar. "Just a moment, Gail! Hi, *Dick!* Come over and have one on me! Where the devil have you been these last six months? . . ."

"Will you have your first dance with me, Gail?" asked Bill Bright after a while. He had noticed her standing patiently by, and his tone conveyed reproof of Alex.

"No, thank you, Bill," she answered quietly. "I'd rather wait . . . really."

Bill Bright nodded. He perfectly understood. Not that he could see any sense in a smashing girl like Gail waiting in this way on the pleasure of a little runt like Alex . . . good buddy though he was. But he supposed God made 'em like that! Gail was looking swell to-night, he thought. When she first arrived on Wednesday she hadn't seemed herself at all. She had been edgy and jittery, and Alex had told her in Bill's hearing that she looked as if she had seen a ghost. "If that's all you have to say about my looks," she had answered, "I'm sorry I came!" and Bill had moved discreetly out of earshot. . . . But now she was herself again; Bill hoped with all his heart that Alex had been good to her. He decided, after careful reflection, to have one more beer. He invited Gail to join him, but she shook her head.

Abruptly Alex seemed to remember her, and introduced her to his friend in the Tanks. Another round was called for—this time Gail did not refuse to join in—and then at last Alex, pulling down the edge of his battle-dress tunic, said, "Well, Gail, what about it? Did you come to dance . . . or did you?"

The rest of the evening was heaven to her, for Alex was in his best mood, ardent and tender, and without a side-glance for any of the other girls present. True, he took Gail back to the bar after almost

every dance; but he was so funny over it, and so intent upon her all the time he exchanged laughs or jokes with the other men, that she could not object. It was, after all, his last evening! She contrived, however, to leave most of her own drinks untasted on the counter, for she thought it as well that one of them should remain clear-headed.

During a waltz he said to her suddenly, "You know, I shall be coming back."

"Of course, you will!" she replied. "You must!"

"I shall! I don't believe the bullet's cast . . . or the shell either . . . that carries my address! . . . And when I come back, Gail . . . then . . . we won't be parted any more!"

"Alex! . . . Oh, Alex!" Her voice failed.

He pressed her hand more closely, and they went on dancing in silence.

About half-way through the evening, as they were returning to the floor after one of their visits to the bar, her vanity-bag fell from her wrist and dropped upon the parquet. She stooped and ascertained that one of the rings holding the handle had broken. "Just a minute, Alex!" she said. "I can't carry this any longer. I'll leave it with my things in the cloak-room."

"Hurry up, then, darling!"

She felt in the bag for a moment, and handed a small bundle to him. "Take care of these for me, will you?" she asked. "I don't like to leave them in the cloak-room."

"What are they?" he asked, opening the wad on his palm. "Good God! The dough! . . . I say, I never saw so many fivers and tenners outside a bank in my life! Gail darling, has your uncle died?"

"No!" she laughed. "It's just two weeks' salary: I always forget to take it to the bank. Doesn't look as if I'd spent much, does it? . . . Put it in your pocket till we get back!"

"Righty-ho!" Alex slipped the notes into the pocket of his tunic and buttoned it. When she came back from the cloak-room they had two more waltzes and a fox-trot; then, as closing-time was approaching, there was a noisy demand for "Sir Roger," and they joined in that amid laughter and cheering. Then the lights were turned half-down to cries of regret, and a drift towards the cloak-rooms began.

IV

As the queue ascended the steep staircase to the gallery for the second house of *Girls for Victory!* there was a continuous rattle of silver at the pay-box. The tall gentleman in the smartly cut dark clothes hesitated a moment, and then drew his coin from his pocket and paid with the rest. He had slipped into the queue just as the doors opened, and so had no chance of finding a front seat inside.

But this did not seem to worry him. He did not even try to snap up one of the rapidly dwindling number of seats in the back rows. Instead he planted himself behind them, leaning over the barrier, and thence surveyed the house through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses which he had first carefully polished with his handkerchief.

"There are still seats at the side, sir," a gallery attendant told him.

"I don't want to sit down," answered the tall gentleman.

"Yo' see," said the attendant in a friendly way, "we don't mooch laike folks standing while there are still seats——"

"Will you mind your own business?" said the other in a tone that made the attendant glance at his unusually good clothes for a patron of this part of the house. The man looked doubtful, and then retired to confer with another attendant near the door.

Monty Du Parc continued to lean over the iron barrier and to study the crowded and noisy audience assembling downstairs. That seemed satisfactory. He did not waste a glance upon the lovely proscenium in late Victorian rococo, with its slim blue pillars, its inlaid cream panellings, its carved masks and foliage, nor upon the gracious curve of the circles, nor upon the ceiling, sculptured with baskets of fruits and goblets. . . . Behind such a proscenium, to such an auditorium might the cardboard ballerinas of Pollock and Webb have come to life and danced *Ondine* or *Robert the Devil*. Behind that proscenium, to that auditorium, had been played the *Cloches de Corneville* and *Geneviève de Brabant*, and *The Mikado* and *Iolanthe* when Gilbert and Sullivan were a novelty. Toole had roused laughter and Wilson Barrett had drawn tears here—but none of it mattered to Monty Du Parc.

Indeed, he would have thought it a heavy disadvantage to a theatre to be so "out of date." Towards such trifles as tradition, history, associations he was the perfect Gallio; no theatre to him, in short, had any significance except as the background for the genius of Monty du Parc; and what he was unobtrusively jotting down in his notebook during the overture was not, it is to be feared, an appreciation of one of the theatrical treasures of Britain, but grumbles about this and that . . . for instance, the way the travelling musical director was conducting.

As the overture ended there was a pause. Then the tableau curtains were swayed back in the middle, and Jack Kelham appeared and made a bow. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced, "owing to the indisposition of Miss Gail Darien her parts at this performance will be played by Miss——"

The usual "O-o-h!" of disappointment drowned the understudy's name. Up in the gallery Monty Du Parc put away his notebook and stroked his little moustaches. "This ought to be interesting," he said to himself.

V

At the ladies' room in the Barn there was quite a long queue, and Gail had to wait for some time to get her coat and bag. When she came out at last she saw Alex, with his plum-coloured beret on, waiting for her near the black-screened doors. He came towards her with an odd smile, and she noticed that he wavered in his walk.

"Alex!" she said in a worried voice. "What's the matter with you? What have you been doing?"

He looked at her a little glassily, and laughed. "End of a perfect day!" he said thickly. "Raided bar with party and beg to report capture of one bo'le whishky . . . half bo'le gin. Party returned safely to bashe with all ob—ob—oh! My God! . . . Ob—jec'ives shecured!"

Gail's heart fell like lead to think that he should be capable of spending his last hour with her in this condition. Within so short a time of his loving pledges to her! And she was also frightened. "You can't drive like this!" she whispered. "Oh, how could you to-night? Where's Bill Bright?" She looked round. "His car's here. He must drive us back!"

"Bill Bright—nothing!" ejaculated Alex, taking her bare arm in a bruising grip. "You're dated with me, not him! 'Sides, Bill can't drive a car for toffee! You'll see! I'll be all ri'! Always drive be'er when plastered. More careful!"

Gail gave up the argument. After all, there was a good little Guardian Angel who looked after madmen and drunks. . . . And anyway, it was Alex! The bruise on her arm was throbbing with a delicious, stinging pain: what did it matter what happened so long as she was close to him? . . . Besides, once they were clear of the crowd getting away from the Barn (and he would have to go slow until then) they were very unlikely to meet anything at all on the country roads leading back to the camp.

She was further reassured by the way in which Alex steered out of his place in the double line of the park, wove his way through the other departing cars, and negotiated the narrow exit from the drive between plaster pillars marked by a tiny red bulb on each. They were out on the road now and quickening; they passed several cars, and then Alex slowed up alongside one and shouted at the driver. By the dim light of the speed dial in the other car Gail recognized Bill Bright, who turned and grinned at them. . . . Then his expression changed. "Where are you coming to, you d——d fool?" he shouted through the window, and braked hard. "Whoopee!" yelled Alex, shooting right across Bill's way, and then doing a sort of figure of eight across the road in front of his friend's car. "Alex, stop! You're crazy!" screamed Gail; but he only waved his hand back to Bill and shot off down the road, which, mercifully, seemed clear.

They went on at forty, quickening to forty-five; then Gail, clutching her wrap on her head, looked round. "There's a car following us," she said. "I'm sure it's Bill."

"What the hell's he dogging us for?" answered Alex almost with a snarl, and quickened to fifty.

"Why shouldn't he follow us?" retorted Gail. "He's your friend, isn't he?"

"This'll throw him off!" With a sickening swerve Alex turned into a side-road, almost ditching as he went round the corner, but straightening out after a perilous skid. Gail uttered a shriek, and he grinned at her in the corpse-like moonlight. "Sorry, old thing!" he said. "That *was* a bit of a shave! I'll not do it again!"

"We're right off our proper road now, I suppose you know?" remarked Gail after a while. "Have you any idea where we're headed for? Don't forget you've to be on the air-field to take off at half-past five!"

"All tickety-boo!" replied Alex. "We're just making a loop to attack objective from 'nother direction. Road's not so hot; too many of these d——d turnings! But we are approaching objective all ri'!"

"I wish you'd kept to the main road," said Gail, "and I wish you wouldn't go round corners on the wrong side!"

"Nothing on these roads this time of night!" answered Alex, and began to sing. He had a pleasant tenor, and he knew the songs she liked best. Nestling up against his shoulder—hardly to the improvement of his driving—she joined from time to time in harmony in "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" and "Music, Maestro, Please!" The pang of approaching parting was dulled; it seemed that this last drive together would last eternally.

"Kiss me!" she said, putting up her face to his; and he turned his head from the winding road to crush his moustache against her cheek and then to seek her mouth. . . .

"I'm sure," she said at last drowsily, "we're miles away from R—. You do really know where you're going, darling?"

"Course, I do!" he answered in a voice suspiciously like a snore, and they drove on and on, while cloud drew over the moon, at the same whizzing speed.

Afterwards Gail believed that she had gone off to sleep leaning upon Alex's shoulder . . . and perhaps this unconsciousness spared her something. . . .

VI

"Well, but didn't you go to her lodgings to enquire?" demanded Monty Du Parc roughly of Jack Kelham as soon as the curtain had fallen at the end of the show.

"No, Mr Du Parc," answered Jack, with a badgered air. "Evie sent up word she must rest and not be disturbed, and—well—I was

working like a pink dog here, with an understudy on, and a dozen other things going wrong. Besides, the medical certificate seemed in order. It says, 'For the rest of this week.' What's the matter with that?"

Monty waved the half-sheet of notepaper with its professional heading furiously in his face. "You took a certificate from Dr Swing?" he almost shouted. "Did you join the profession yesterday? Why, every little chorus girl knows enough to go to him in her trouble, and what his price will be for helping her! I'm surprised myself," he sneered, "that the immaculate Gail——"

Jack Kelham suddenly flushed up. "Look, Mr Du Parc!" he stammered. "If there's anything out of order about this medical certificate, I'm ready to answer for it at Head Office, the proper place! In the meantime I'll thank you to keep a clean tongue in your head and not——"

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to? You seem to forget your position, Kelham!"

"I forget nothing, Mr Du Parc! It's you who should be above making such suggestions about a girl like Gail!"

"Who made suggestions?" said Monty after a pause. "I neither know nor care on what terms Gail Darien got this certificate. But I'm perfectly certain it's not genuine; and since you didn't investigate, it becomes my duty to. Fancy letting an understudy go on, with the competition we've got up here this week! Where's Gail lodging?"

"I've got the address on my list!"

"Find it, then . . . don't let the grass grow! . . . and we'll drive straight along in my car and get at the truth. If I'm wrong I apologize to all concerned, but you've got to convince me of that!"

"Of course, I'm ready to come with you," answered Jack with a faint tremble at the back of his voice. He was seeing unpleasant possibilities opening up. "I've no wish to be a party to anything irregular in my position!"

"Of course you haven't, Jack . . . in your position!" replied Monty with a discomfiting smile. As they left the theatre together, Jack saw Nita watching them, white-faced, and winked at her to reassure her.

A reassurance he did not himself feel as he drove in silence at Monty's side through the blacked-out streets of the Five Towns, from the carefully screened furnaces of which scarcely a flicker showed on the velvet robe of the night. Arrived at "Avalon," Monty sprang out first and rang the bell. The door was opened by Evie, and the sickly look on her face at sight of him was a confession in itself.

"We've called," said Monty, as soon as they were in and the door shut, "to enquire after Miss Darien. Is she in?"

"No, Mr Du Parc," answered Evie, falling into the trap. "At least, I mean . . . well, of course, she is!"

"No . . . but of course she is!" repeated Monty cruelly. "Then, may we see her?"

Evie put herself across the foot of the stairs. "You can't go up, Mr Du Parc!" she declared. "Miss Darien can see nobody!"

"Why, is she so ill as all that?"

"Yes, Mr Du Parc. She's been in bed since yesterday, and the doctor says she can see nobody at all!"

"The doctor?" asked Monty quickly. "What doctor? Surely not Dr Swing? . . . Who's been attending her here, then?"

"I—I—don't rightly know his name," faltered Evie.

"Oh, but surely you must! Where does he live? Mr Kelham and I would like to get in touch with him. Possibly your landlady knows. Call her, will you?"

"You can't see the people of the house, either!" cried Evie defiantly. "They're all out . . . at the pictures!"

"I see." Monty stroked his moustaches. He seemed thoroughly to enjoy this third-degree. "In that case, Evie, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take me up to Miss Darien's bedroom for a moment, just to find out how she is."

"I couldn't do that, sir. She's asleep!"

"It won't hurt her to be woken just for a minute. Come, Evie, I'm determined to see your mistress; it's my duty!"

"I say, Mr Du Parc," objected Jack uncomfortably. "Aren't you pushing things a bit far?"

"Please don't butt in till you're asked, Kelham! . . . Now, Evie, are you taking me up or must I go alone and knock at her door?"

Evie suddenly collapsed, weeping, on the bright-red carpet of the bottom stair. "You needn't go up!" she said. "You won't find her there! . . . It's not my fault! . . . I told her not to do it!"

"Ah!" said Monty. "At last! I always thought we should find out something interesting. . . . Now, Evie, the whole story, please!"

VII

The drivers of the convoy, the leader as much as the others, were dog-tired; they had been coming along since early yesterday, and the officer in charge had had the idea from his map of a short cut to Birmingham. They had dropped their motor-cycle outriders some hours ago, owing to radio orders that bade these return to pick up another convoy in the morning, miles away. Just like D.H.Q., the officer had thought! So they had gone jolting and rumbling on alone with their dim lights at a quicker speed than they would have chosen on such a winding road if they had not been wearily anxious to arrive.

Afterwards the driver of the leading truck said he had heard no horn and seen no lights. The officer declared that the little racing-car

must have sailed straight out of a hidden turning on to the road in front of them, and the police who examined it doubted from the state of its battery whether it could have had any lights at all at the time.

What seemed wonderful in the first place was that any occupant of the car had survived. But by sheer good fortune the heavy truck had, instead of striking it full on, only caught its back-wheels as it shot across the road, overturning it, with its back-axle broken, half in and half out of the ditch on the far side. Yet in the darkness and confusion they had thought the woman dead at first when they dragged her out from beneath it and laid her on an army blanket on the road. It had seemed likely to them that there had been a man as well, driving the car; but no trace of any other person could be found, though as soon as signs of life were established in Gail, the officer sent men with torches to search the road and the ditch. So they concluded that the girl must have been driving herself; and after getting police and ambulance to the spot by radio, the convoy lumbered on its uneasy way.

It was not surprising that they failed to find Alex Gilroy. He had, by the force of the impact, been flung clean over the steering-wheel into the ditch at a distance of several yards, where he lay for some moments stunned, with a broken wrist and a face gashed by the flying glass of the wind-screen. But paratroopers are tough, and he came round quickly, in time to hear voices over his head crying, "She's dead, Sergeant!" "Bring another torch there!"; "Get a blanket to put her on!"

In a flash his brain, trained to react to emergencies in spite of pain or shock, mapped the situation. Gail dead . . . poor little tart! . . . He responsible for her end! . . . Detention for enquiries . . . sentence for manslaughter, perhaps! . . . And at 5.30 the plane taking off at the air-field, God knew how many miles away, without him . . . court martial for desertion! Even as he formulated these possibilities he had begun to crawl on hands and knees trained to silent stalking through the mud and water of the ditch away from the d—d place.

A bend in the road, hiding it from the view of the men clustered round their trucks at the scene of the accident . . . a gate into a field! Alex wriggled under the bottom bar and rolled up close under the hedge, feeling himself swooning again. As he passed out he heard voices calling along the road, lights flashing through the hedge . . .

When he came to himself again, the sky was filled with grey light; birds were beginning to chirp; there was no other sound. He detached his watch with a hiss of pain from his broken wrist; the glass was done in, but the watch was still going. . . . He hoped it was not right, though, for it said a quarter to four! And he had not the gleam of an idea in what part of the country he might be!

He must get to a road . . . not the one he had come from . . . and pray for a hitch-hike. . . . It was twenty minutes later when he

leaned, exhausted and streaming with blood from his cut face, against a tree-trunk on the edge of an unknown road, and the first car coming by slowed and stopped.

Alex Gilroy had always believed in his star. The car, which so promptly halted at sight of the bedraggled, bleeding figure, contained a doctor returning from a farm-house confinement. Alex had his story ready. A car-smash . . . the other fellow had driven on . . . he himself must be on the air-field at R— in an hour and a half or be disgraced. Would the doctor patch him up?

"That's all very well, young man," answered the medico. "But what I want to know before I drive you away is whether there were any other casualties?"

"None!" lied Alex. "I was driving alone in a small car and hit a heavy lorry. . . . I don't suppose they even noticed."

"Jump in if you can, then!" said the doctor. "Shall I give you a hand? . . . Lord knows I don't want to stop a young chap from going out to kill Huns if I can help it!"

His surgery was only a few miles farther down the road. He put stitches in Alex's face, examined his wrist, and declared, as he rapidly enveloped it in cold compresses, that he could not diagnose the damage in its swollen state. "Something's broken," he said, "but I can't say what. You'll have to—"

Alex interrupted, "I'll have to find someone to drive me to the air-field. Any suggestions, Doctor? Can I make it?"

The doctor looked at his clock. "Yes, I think, just. . . . I admire your keenness! I'll ring up my friend Morrison; he keeps taxis. I think he'd turn out and take you: he was invalided from Dunkirk. It's a good thirty miles, though . . . cost you something at this hour!"

"That doesn't matter. . . . And what do I owe you, Doctor?"

Alex put his uninjured hand in his breast-pocket and brought out Gail's notes, from which, with supreme unconsciousness, he paid the doctor as soon as the car had been telephoned for. . . . When he was rushed on to the air-field just as the pilot and the other passengers came out of the huts to cross to the waiting plane, he paid the taxi-owner his heavy fare, and gave him a generous tip from the same source.

"Happy landings, sir!" called the taxi-man, as he watched the squat figure dwindle at a brisk limp across the wide, dawn-lit field.

VIII

As Monty and Jack drove back together to the theatre through the blackness after hearing Evie's confession, Jack at last broke the silence by saying, "Aren't you being very hard over this, Mr Du Parc? The

little girl may be really unfit to sing all the same; she's had a very trying time for her nerves since the war began."

"Haven't we all?" asked Monty curtly. "That a reason why we should all break our engagements? Gail's cost us hundreds of pounds, probably, by this charming escapade. Who wants to come in to see an understudy?"

"This girl's not too bad," pleaded Jack lamely.

"All the less reason to regret parting with Gail Darien, then!"

"I think, if you'll allow me to say so, Mr Du Parc, you'll be making a mistake if you sack Gail over this business. She's a draw up North, and others will be only too ready to snap her up."

"Other managements won't snap her up when they know why I've had to get rid of her. . . . *Unreliable!* . . . She's blotted her copy for good!" The exultation in his voice was unmistakable. Jack Kelham suddenly went off the deep end.

"Do you *want* to ruin the little girl, then?" he demanded.

"Don't take that tone to me, please, Kelham!" Monty sniggered disagreeably. "Hardly the way, is it, to induce me to show leniency in *your* case?"

"What do you mean, *my* case? You've got nothing on me!"

"Oh, haven't we, my boy! A pretty touring manager you are! Accepting any old snide certificate from a notorious dope doctor, without making a scrap of enquiry! Is that how you look after the interests of the people who pay you?"

"If you're not satisfied with me, the answer is——"

"Oh no! Don't think I'll let you resign! You're sacked, Kelham, and I'm going into the office now to write out your dismissal in due form!"

They had pulled up outside the stage-door of the theatre, where two or three stage-hands were still hanging about. Jack climbed slowly out of the car and began to walk towards the door, shaking with fury. If Nita had been present she might have warned Monty that on the very rare occasions when her good-natured husband did get his rag out . . . But she was not there; and Monty, seeing Jack apparently escaping him in the black-out, shouted, as he swung lithely out of the driving-seat, "Come back, you d——d bum!"

"Famous last words!" muttered Jack, wheeling round, and letting him have it with his left. He hit even harder than he had meant to, for, misjudging his distance in the dark, he caught Monty's jaw coming towards him. The Director fell against the wheel of his car and collapsed on his knees, choking and spitting.

The knot of loungers round the stage-door rushed forward to see what had happened, but, worse, an authoritative hand was laid upon Jack's arm as he stood aghast at his deed, and a voice said, "Eh, now? What's to do here?" It was a passing policeman, and unable to follow Monty Du Parc's wrathful mumbling (he had to have two

teeth out next day), this officious constable insisted on taking names and addresses and securing witnesses for a summons for breach of the peace.

Jack Kelham, stone-cold now, walked sucking his knuckles, which he had grazed on Monty's teeth, into his dressing-room. There, to his surprise, he found Nita still waiting for him.

"Jack!" she cried. "What on earth have you done?"

"Done for us both, dear!" he replied, and sat down heavily on a chair.

"Mind the rec——" shrieked Nita, but it was too late. . . . Jack flung the fragments from under him on to the floor. "Socked him on the jaw!" he said.

Nita made a dash to the dressing-table, on which a copy of the *Stage* lay open. "Look!" she cried. "Comic wanted for concert party starting Douglas, Monday week! . . . Write at once! Tell them all you've done!"

But by the time Jack's letter reached the organizer of the concert party on the Isle of Man, all England knew what he had done. He had never had such notices, either for headlines or for length, as those he received in both the local and the national Press after the police-court proceedings in which he was fined for assaulting that leading personality of the theatrical world, Mr Monty Du Parc, of Fizz.

IX

There was a new manager of the *Girls for Victory!* company when it assembled at the theatre in Birmingham for band rehearsal on the following Monday morning. Just as they began, with the understudy taking Gail's place, the assistant stage-manager saw a woman standing at the side of the stage where it was lit only by a bar of livid daylight from a begrimed window in the roof. He went over to see who it was, and uttered an exclamation. It was Gail Darien, pale as a ghost, with eyes burning in violet sockets, and an overcoat thrown over her shoulders to conceal the bruises on her neck and arms.

These bruises, apart from severe shock, were the only injuries she had sustained in the accident. She had luckily been thrown clear of the half-capsized car, in the soft mud at the bottom of the ditch.

"Fred!" she said in a weak voice. "Where's Jack? Tell him, please, I'm back on time, *and ready to go on to-night!*"

The young man shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Gail," he said. "There's not a hope!"

"What do you mean?" She closed her eyes. "Don't be funny, Fred! Find Jack, at once!"

"I can't, Gail. He's left. And—and Mr Du Parc's upstairs in the office. He left word, if you did turn up, you were to go and see him at once."

CHAPTER THREE

I

As Grigori Zharkov let himself into his flat—one of those colossal pale-red blocks intruded during the inter-war period into the grey and leafy tranquillity of the district that runs down from Wellington Road to Maida Vale—he heard the sound of the piano being played in the lounge. He paused, listening, as he had done years ago in the Mews, while he slowly removed and hung up his overcoat and silk muffler.

He was looking more prosperous and authoritative than ever on this October afternoon, with no sign about him that clothing was rationed. And his appearance was a true reflection of his present status. In the preceding August, a few weeks after Gail Darien had been dismissed with ignominy by Monty Du Parc from the employment of Fizz, another great change had passed over the management of that concern. Bob Forshaw had been finally compelled to throw up the sponge.

During the last twelve months the old showman had often wondered angrily why it was that, during the war-time boom in light entertainment, when everyone else was doing so well, his bad luck seemed persistent; but that was the fact. Extravagant a toy as Bobo Baggailey had turned out to be—among beggars on horseback she was champion jockey—that alone would not account for it. Some unwise incursions into the Stock Exchange, a field in which he was the merest amateur, had been more deadly; but it was in the theatre world that he had had his worst defeats. Fizz indeed had been doing all right. In the provinces *Girls for Victory!* and other touring revues had been coining money; they had had a long run at the St. Andrew's of a clever comedy of the home front; by the end of this year they hoped to recover the Parthenope from their rivals. But his supremacy over Fizz was a thing Forshaw was finding it harder and harder to maintain; and the struggle with Raymondy had gone continuously against his other interests, especially in the North. Purple Halls had been lost to him long since; now two of his other companies had been forced into liquidation, and from neither of these catastrophes had old Bob escaped without being stung—he asked himself if he was losing his grip. For his friends this was no longer a question, but an assertion loudly repeated in board-rooms, bars, and theatrical clubs. He overheard it more than once, and it drove him to consult a Harley Street man about dyspepsia and "war-nerves."

What he himself felt was that he was up against an opposition more ingenious, relentless, and subterranean than any he had encountered in his long career of showmanship, and he believed he could put his finger

on it. He would need, he added with disgust, to wipe that finger afterwards; for it would have fallen on the greasy, fur-collared coat or the black-banded hand of Mr Ivan Zaleski, who was clearly aiming at almost total control of the London theatre by a merger of Fizz with Raymondy. Nobody would believe Forshaw was right about this. Zaleski was "in" everything no doubt, and since the war he had become even more intricately concerned in all that was going on, in munitions as much as music-halls, in timber-yards as much as theatres. But it seemed absurd to impute vast plans of domination to that ridiculous little object with its inarticulate, spluttering speech!

"You say that, Monty!" Forshaw remarked on one occasion, "but I wonder if you believe it. Didn't you prove that Zaleski was the guidin' spirit, like, when Raymondy was formed, eh?"

"I thought so at the time," Monty had replied airily. "But, now—I wonder." And he had taken off his horn-rims to wipe them. "I'm not afraid of Zaleski, anyway," he added.

"Do you and Grigori want to buy my shares in Fizz?" asked Forshaw point-blank, and then Mr Du Parc's shining glasses had indeed fallen off his nose with surprise. "I'm noan sellin' out to Zaleski," Forshaw had continued. "But I'll let you and Grigori have them at twelve pounds each . . . all but nine hundred, joost to keep a footin' for mysel' in Fizz. That's seven thousand I'll sell for eighty-four thousand pounds, if you two can put it up! You've fourteen days to consider it."

Monty had rushed to Zharkov with the news, and they had agitatedly debated the proposal. The upshot had been that they had each put up £12,000, and had raised the balance on a joint loan from a small but wealthy syndicate dealing in theatrical finance under the title "Goldsack Investments, Ltd." The shares they divided equally between them, which gave them together a controlling vote over the new Chairman Zaleski. The August day on which this transfer of power was made was the blackest, probably, in all Bob Forshaw's life. Fizz, his own creation, to pass thus into the power of others! Nothing but the resilience of a Lancashire showman could have rebounded from the blow—that and the satisfaction of knowing that he had at least not had to lower his flag to the treacle merchant sustained him in his bitter hour.

II

But no wonder the *maestro* looked inflated as he drew from the breast-pocket of his overcoat a piece of music, fresh in its gay cover from the publisher, entitled "'Soliloquy,' by Grigori Zharkov," and opened the door into the lounge of his flat.

He had never understood why Beryl had insisted on such a drab

decoration—for so it seemed to him—of their home. The unfigured buff wall-papers of the lounge and dining-room, the old-gold curtains and dull-red cushions, wore to him a poverty-stricken air. Nor could he see the reasons for Beryl's choice of pictures. One of them, in particular, annoyed him. It had to his eyes the aspect of a piece of tessellated flooring, but was asserted with challenging particularity on the label of the frame to be, "Mill of St. Hubert, Arles," by . . . he never could remember the artist's name, some Frenchman! Nobody had heard of him, whoever he was, for Zharkov had made private enquiries of an expert, and had learned that the picture was not worth anything . . . not even what he had been induced by Beryl to pay for it. A painful bit of news, and he sighed even now as the thing caught his eye on entering the room.

Beyond these weird pictures and a couple of Persian rugs (which he knew to be good, for his father had been in the rug-trade at Tiflis and Azerbaijan), the room contained no ornaments worth noticing. On the grand piano, a magnificent Blüthner, there stood a big black vase with flowers of silvery shell, which was removed when Beryl played, as she was now doing; and over the bookcase—Zharkov could not understand how a refined girl like Beryl could display books, not even uniformly bound in leather, in a room to which their friends came—there was a bust of Mozart, a white cast worth about 30s. . . . really, Beryl was most eccentric! She persisted, for instance, in keeping her harp in a corner of the room, as if in defiant reminder to him that she was still a professional capable of earning her own living. And, even more idiotic, she had cluttered up the bedroom with the smaller harp inherited from her father—that piece of old junk! "A harp in a bedroom! *Meshugga!*" Zharkov would murmur with a sour smile.

Still, with all her caprices, Beryl was a good girl. She never ran him in for much; indeed, he had been forced once or twice to remind her of the necessity of dressing up to his position. She wasn't a bit greedy; and with her looks and her temperament . . . well, he would not exchange her for any other woman he knew!

This afternoon, as he closed the door behind him, Beryl stopped playing and looked up with a smile from behind the piano. She was wearing a vermillion silk dress with a gold thread in it, and had a cherry-coloured band in her hair.

"I have a present for you, dear!" he said, proudly advancing across the carpet. "A surprise! An advance copy!" And he flourished the brand-new sheets of "Soliloquy" above his head before handing them to her.

She smiled again, with pleasure, as she read the title page. "Do I know this, Grigori?" she asked.

"No!" he replied. "I kept it to myself. You have been saying that lately it has been all the time business and not music with me. So I have worked at this quietly, in Doherty's rooms, so as to surprise

you and show I have still ideas, and am still a composer! Play it and see!"

Beryl unfolded the sheets on the music-stand of the piano, and took a look at them before beginning to play. "How secretive of you, Grigori!" she murmured, and then began the first bars. After a little while she broke off with a line in her forehead, and said, "Haven't I heard this before? It sounds familiar! . . . I'm sure I have!"

He shook his head. "I am sure you have not! Nobody but Doherty has heard it. I got him to copy it for me. It is quite new to you, Beryl; it has been shut up in here!" He tapped his forehead playfully, and waved his cigar.

"Don't drop ash all over the carpet, *please*, Grigori!" she cried. "I'm always telling you!" She leaned over and put a heavy, cut-glass ash-tray before him. "In here, if you don't mind!" she said.

"Why?" he asked. "Cigar ash does not injure a carpet at all, don't you know that?"

"Perhaps not, Grigori! But it looks so dirty!"

He looked in a bewildered way at the ring of dark spots round his feet, and then glanced at Beryl to make out if she was serious. Wasn't there a char to sweep up, then?

She played "Soliloquy" through to the end, and then sat staring at it with a puzzled look.

"Vell?" he asked. "Don't you like it?"

She came to herself, and complimented him. "The best thing you've ever done, Grigori!" she told him. "But quite out of your usual line, isn't it?"

"I have so many lines!" he assured her. "But I think this will be a big success, when we bring it before the public. I may give a special concert to introduce it. . . . Well, tell me now, what was it you were playing when I came in?"

She laughed, as she moved "Soliloquy" off the stand and rearranged some sheets lying under it. "You asked me that very same question . . . do you remember? . . . once before when I was playing the same composer, and from the same work. It was my brother Peter's *Orange Nell* you were hearing again, Grigori!"

"Ah, but I had not heard *that* piece! . . . You have some more of the opera, then? Play it to me!"

"I have four numbers . . . I thought somehow that I had five; but there seem to be only four. Peter wrote to me a little while back to ask if I had them safe. I hadn't had them out . . . oh! . . . for three years nearly. It seems he's managed to compose a whole lot more while on service, which I call good work!"

"Play me what you have . . . all of it!" said Zharkov from an arm-chair.

Beryl obeyed, and he listened with close attention. Two of the numbers he asked her to repeat, rising from his chair to pace up and

down, and sometimes standing by the window staring out at the autumn tints in the trees of the gardens opposite. The carpet was acquiring a cinder-track, but Beryl thought it discreet not to complain. She could see that Grigori was impressed, and felt that this might be an important moment for her brother.

"Any more?" he asked. She shook her head. "I like it," he said. "We could perhaps do something with it when your brother comes home. . . . *Orange Nell*, he calls it, eh? A good name!"

"That would be grand for Peter, Grigori!" she exclaimed, flushing with honest pleasure. Then her eye fell again on the gaudy cover of "*Soliloquy*" and the puzzled frown returned to her face.

III

"Come now, dear!" pleaded Evie, "let me cook you something for breakfast!" She had just brought in Gail's morning tea, and stood by the bedside in the fawn-coloured room, with its immense built-in dressing-table of golden sycamore wood, its glimmering mirrors, and dark-green curtains, rolling her apron in her hands and looking down on her mistress with a worried expression.

"Please don't!" answered Gail in a hoarse voice. "I should only be ill if I tried to eat. . . . And don't draw the curtains, Evie! The reading lamp's enough. What time is it?" She pushed her tangled hair off her forehead.

"Well, dear, it's past nine, and you ought to be thinking of getting up, you know!"

Gail turned over on her back and stared blankly at Evie. "Get up?" she demanded. "What for?"

Evie shrugged her shoulders. "Well, dear, you should know best! But excuse my plain-speaking, shouldn't you be doing something about . . . about it all? . . . Go and see them agents again, I would!"

"I'm tired of hearing them tell me they've nothing for me. They're all the same—Joseph Stulitzer, who used to run to the door to open it for me when I was at the Parthenope, and the rest of them! You see, Fizz have passed the word on. The managers mean to make an example of me, to frighten the others. Do you know, in all this month since I've felt well enough to go round and look for work, I've only had one offer—only one? And that was from some wretched fellow up in Lancashire getting up a cheap touring panto, who offered me a tenner a week . . . me . . . Gail Darien, leading lady at the Parthenope!"

"Well, dear," said Evie, seating herself familiarly on the bottom of the bed, "the question for you is, do you want ever to be leading lady in the West End again?"

"What's the point of asking that?"

"Because, if you do, you should forget about ever having been there before. Build up again from the beginning!"

Gail looked at her for a moment; then her face quivered, and turning it over on to the pillow she wept so that her sobs shook the bed. Evie frowned. All this, she thought, was very bad. It wasn't the way to face up to things. Why, she remembered that time in Brussels, when she was stranded with the troupe without a bob, and . . . her mind ran over the still searing recollection while mechanically she patted Gail's shoulder. "Now! Now!" she exhorted her. "Don't take on like that! Don't, ducky! You must keep your pecker up! Sometimes you make me feel desprit, you do!"

Gail turned her grief-disfigured face from the pillow, and Evie felt a little shock. With its long, haggard outline, its greenish pallor, and the dull and straggling disorder of the hair hanging round it . . . well, there wasn't much glamour left, was there? Of course, her mistress wasn't made up; but if she began to let herself go like this, then certainly no agent would . . . Evie mastered the disloyal thought, but she felt as if it had been read.

"I wonder," Gail said in a dead voice, "that you don't go, Evie. You could do better for yourself, I should think!"

"So should I!" retorted Evie, stung. "I should do better . . . we both would . . . if you'd pull yourself together! Look, dear, why not count your blessings, as they say? You're young; you've got your health back after that dreadful smash—by a miracle, I call it; you've got your voice, *and* your looks . . . if you'd only take care of 'em! Then we've still got this lovely flat——"

"We shan't have it much longer," replied Gail, sitting up.

"How's that, dear?" enquired Evie.

"My lawyers have sent me word that the landlord is getting a Court order to turn me out, and it seems I can do nothing about it. So where do we go from here? . . . And does it matter? . . . The furniture ought to fetch a decent bit, even as things are to-day. I want to give you a nice present, Evie . . . and then you'd better go back to your sister at Barnett——"

"Oh, you do make me mad!" Evie beat her feet impatiently on the floor. "You aren't surely going to give in like that?"

She looked despairingly at Gail. Nothing seemed capable of shaking her out of the apathy, the waking dream, she had been in ever since the disaster of last June. Evie had found it natural that when they left the *Girls for Victory!* company together, after Gail's curt dismissal by Monty, her mistress should have been in a state of collapse. She was really ill after the car smash, ill with bruising, shaking, and nervous shock; she could have done nothing else than seek the haven of this flat—still hers—in London, and take to her bed there.

But that was over four months ago now, and Gail, healed in body, seemed utterly broken in spirit. It was as though she was incapable of

making an effort. Evie didn't understand much about business matters or debts on the scale in which Gail seemed to be enmeshed; but she had a shrewd notion that things would not have reached their present desperate pass if claims had not just been left to drag on, to mount up, to get beyond the possibility of arrangement. . . . Was it all that chap? Was Gail still pining for him? He'd cost her enough, surely!

"Tell me, dearie!" she said abruptly. "That flash feller in the paratroops——"

"Please don't talk about him, Evie!"

"No, but did he never write a line to you . . . though he was, in a manner of speaking, the cause of all this bother?"

"I've heard nothing, and I don't know where he is. I ran across his friend Bill Bright a little time ago, and he's not had a line from him either. But he said he had heard that Alex had won another decoration in Africa. Bill says all Alex's regiment think he's one of the bravest men they know, and one of the most unselfish . . . the man to have with you in a tight corner. He's just got a kink, Evie, where we're concerned, that's all. . . . Now don't bring him up again, please, ever."

Evie sighed. That avenue seemed closed. Not that she had ever seen much hope along it. "Can't you do nothink?" she asked. "The bank——?"

Gail shuddered. "Evie, I daren't go down the same street! There's a new manager who's simply foul to me."

"Well, I don't know nothink about bank managers . . . thank God, I say, since they seem to 'aunt you so! But I do think, love, you ought to get up and make yourself pretty, and then go round and see what you can do." She rose from the bed. "I must get on with my chores," she said. "Don't forget, ducks, you're lunching with Mr Warner to-day at the Dijon! You said he was coming up by last night's train from Scotland, and going straight to meet you there."

"Oh, is it to-day? I don't feel like seeing him. I think I'll put him off; he'll be in London quite a time waiting for a medical board. He believes he may get his ticket, as his chest keeps so bad, poor boy! But I don't want him to see me in this state" ("I should think not!" interjected Evie mentally), "so I'll phone the Dijon to say I can't come."

"You can't," Evie reminded her grimly. "Unless you go out to a box!"

"Yes," murmured Gail, "I forgot they'd cut us off. You see, Evie, we *can't* go on!"

"I should try *some*think!" said Evie with the emphasis of exasperation. "Else they'll take you for factory work, and what a flop you'd be at that! Won't you let me bring you in some toast? Do you good!"

Gail soundlessly formed the word "No" with her lips, and Evie, frowning and clucking, went towards the door. As she opened it she

turned round and saw Gail staring at the ceiling with the lost look that annoyed her so much. "I'll bring you your mail, anyway!" she said.

Having done that, she picked up the Electrolux and went into the drawing-room where the pink and grey decorations were tarnished by neglect and infiltrations of bomb-dust from neighbouring victims of the blitz. It was a faintly foggy November day outside, and the dirty light did nothing to make the big room more cheerful.

As she manipulated the whirring machine, Evie considered her own position. It would be sheer romanticism to assert that she had never once in the last six weeks, during which Gail's affairs had begun to drift at an accelerated pace towards crisis, dreamed of leaving a service that had become quite an impracticable one for her. Gail had always managed somehow to find the means to pay her wages, it was true; but there was the future to think of. Where was this going to get her, and in any case, how much longer would the tradesmen continue to give Gail credit?

Plenty of good jobs going these days, that was sure, in factories, canteens, hotels . . . or as a dresser in a first-class West End theatre again. Her sister Doreen kept telling her she was a fool to stick to Gail Darien. . . . Doreen was acutely interested in preventing Evie from squandering any of her savings on a sentimental impulse, for she and her husband had hopes that her little boy David would profit some day from his good Aunt's thrift. . . . Evie realized their calculations . . . but young David certainly was a poppet.

Evie had been connected with the profession one way or another now for . . . she did not care to tell herself how many years. The worst of it . . . or was it really the best of it? . . . was that it was always ups and downs, up to-day and down to-morrow. Gail Darien had been up, up, up when she and Evie came together, and Evie had liked the kudos of being her dresser and personal maid. She had liked the consideration she enjoyed in the theatre and the presents she received from her mistress's admirers. She had liked the reflected glory that shone upon her at Doreen's tea-parties, where she had been treated as almost a glamour-girl herself; and where they were ready to listen to her stories of Gail for ever.

That was another point. There was always something happening with Gail . . . you couldn't call it a dull life! Well; it had been dreary enough lately, no doubt, but . . . you never could tell. Besides, she liked the girl, though she judged her a bit soft for the profession with all its hard knocks and mischances.

Still, one couldn't let feelings enter into the question . . . not really . . . one must think of oneself and one's family . . . of that dear little chap David . . . yes, and of Doreen, though she'd better not be too cocksure! . . .

Evie's eye was caught as she swept by an American illustrated newspaper lying crumpled on the sofa. She remembered it had come a day

or two ago. As she picked it up to clear it away, she noticed a familiar face in a photograph, and held the paper up to read the caption:

DEREK VORTIGERN, *whose world-political war play "Dawn over Moscow" has hit the headlines hard in New York.*

Near the photograph was half a column of letter-press giving a "profile" of the "British actor-author." Some of it was too American in phrasing for Evie to grasp, some was above her comprehension. But she did gather from it that Gail's ex-husband was the big hit of the moment over there, that the women were mobbing him, and that his takings in salary and royalties bade fair to become astronomical.

Only think of that now! Three years ago in this very room Evie had done her best to bring Gail and her husband together again . . . but Gail had refused to patch it up with him. What a girl she was for making mistakes! . . . That had been a big one, if you like! And on the whole to Evie, as she finished the drawing-room, it seemed best that Gail should do as she had said just now in the bedroom. She had better sell the furniture . . . she would be sure to remember her promise to give Evie a generous present, that was her way. Yes, she had better sell the furniture, it was all she had, except her dresses which, with an actress's wisdom, she had clung to until the last; and then, well, she must do what she could even if it meant taking that job at ten pounds a week. Why should she be so choosy; had not Evie danced for years for half that sum? Anyhow, she must do what she thought best, and Evie really must look out for herself.

IV

At this point of her reflections Evie was interrupted by the unexpected entry of Gail daintily dressed in black for walking, with high-heeled suède court shoes proclaiming their pre-war cut, a vanity-bag of shining leather, and a small diamanté flower on her coat. She was delicately made-up, and wore a simple pointed hat of black felt upon the now carefully combed curls falling upon her shoulders. Altogether a very different figure from the one Evie had left prostrated in the bedroom, and she could not help blinking at it!

"I'm going out," said Gail, "to see the lawyers. Among those letters you brought in was another from those devils, the Income Tax people. I can't understand most of it, as usual; but it winds up that, unless I pay them two thousand pounds within fourteen days they'll 'take proceedings for recovery.' How the devil can I pay them two thousand in a fortnight, even if I sell every stick I have? So I'm going to ask this lawyer what I can do."

"And then go on to lunch with Mr Warner at the Dijon?"

"Yes . . . I suppose I must. . . . I'll be back this afternoon."

She walked swiftly out of the drawing-room, and Evie heard the front door click behind her. That was a quick change! she thought. Those Income Tax fellows must have got her paddy up—and a good thing, too! It was time Gail fought back a little.

Evie picked up the Electrolux to do the bedroom; but had hardly worked in there more than a quarter of an hour when a double post-man's knock fell on the front door. Evie had visions of a registered letter with money in it, or at least a parcel with a nice present, and hurried to open the door.

Immediately a man carrying a notebook and a fountain-pen pushed past her into the flat, followed by an older and shabbier attendant.

"I want to see Miss Gail Darien," he announced. "There's two quarters' rent owing and a Court order for possession and distraint has been made. . . . No, you don't! Shut the door, Woolley!" for Evie, recognizing from the verbiage the hereditary enemy, had made a move to thrust forth at any rate the second invader. They frustrated this.

"What a filthy trick!" gasped Evie. "Pushing a lady around like that!"

"Unvarnished oak hat-stand," was the reply of the leading officer, writing in his book. "That line of talk'll get you nowhere but into trouble, Ma!"

"Ma to you, you saucy gob-stopper!"

"Mat. . . . Small oak table," was the impersonal repartee. "Woolley, go into that bedroom and see what's there!"

"No, you don't!" Evie interposed herself, and pulled the door to behind her back.

"Why, is the Missus in bed?" asked Woolley.

"Mind your own business, you dirty old key-hole snooper!"

"I'm a married man with children, and you didn't ought to call me that, Miss!" protested old Woolley mildly.

His superior, meanwhile, had flung open the door of the drawing-room, and could be heard noting, "Piano . . . probably H.P.! . . . Stuffed settee, two arm-chairs, ditto . . . say eighty pounds. Escritwore, say twenty pounds. . . . One hundred pounds, pretty good! . . . Oil painting . . . I s'pose. 'London Stagers' or 'The Pink Gin's Revenge!' . . . Well, say £100 5s. 6d."

"Mr Montagu!" cried his henchman weakly.

"What's up?" He reappeared in the doorway of the drawing-room.

"That woman obstructing you in your dewties? . . . Oh! Glass what-not, four-legged!" He made a last note. "Your Missus in bed in there?" he asked Evie.

"And what if she is?"

"Tell her to put on her dressing-gown and come out and see me. I've a bit of paper for her. . . . Can she pay?"

"When it's convenient, I s'pose."

"That won't do for us, y'know. And no cheques neither! What's she got in there? Ordinary bedroom soot? . . . It's a good house, I'll put it down, sixty. I've got to go. This man'll stay here in possession and finish the inventory. You tell your Missus to pull herself together and try to find some friends to help her. Shouldn't take all day, if that's her photo in there! Ta-ta, Ma! . . . Oh! velvet portière, say ten pounds."

He opened the door to let himself out, and as he did so a stout, dark, genial man with a bald forehead stepped in.

"Good mornin', my dear!" he said to Evie. "Am I addressin' Miss Gail Darien?"

"Suppose you are? What do you want?" demanded Evie.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Darien!" The new-comer shook hands with her warmly, and withdrawing his friendly clasp left a blue paper in her fingers. "Suit of Papworth and Stubbs, costumiers," he remarked. "Hundred and seven pounds, see? . . . One . . . O . . . Seven . . . O . . . O . . . Cheerio!" And he turned and walked out.

"Well, of all the blasted cheek!" declared Evie wrathfully.

But he was not the last visitor of the kind that she had to cope with this morning; for the news of yesterday's judgment (being against an actress) had found a brief paragraph even in the severely rationed war-time papers, and the race among the creditors had begun.

V

Nobody would have imagined that Gail had been through the strain of the last four months if they had seen her at the Dijon (late Amalfi) now run by a French management, dressed in her dainty outfit, smiling, and lazily puffing at a cigarette between the courses. Peter certainly thought she looked thin in the face, and that her eyes had greeted him from rather deeper hollows than usually; but from something she had let fall as they entered the restaurant about "the first day I've had free from rehearsals for a fortnight," he put these signs down to overwork.

He wanted, however, to hear more in detail what she had been doing, and after the uninspiring jam-roll of course three, "That's enough about me!" he said. "Tell me all *you've* been up to!"

He felt that he had been chattering about himself at outrageous length: she had led him on. She had wanted to know what it was like to be torpedoed; and how he had felt at the end of forty-eight hours in an open boat in the wintry Atlantic before they were picked up; and all about Egypt . . . of which, after all, he had only an ordinary tourist's knowledge. So, evading the Nile and the pyramids and the donkeys, he had told her of the work he had found leisure to do during the shore-job in Alexandria. Out there, he said, on the dusty

fringe of the desert, the West End theatre and its topical revues had seemed to fade out of his mind; but on the other hand green England, with its grey towers and its historical memories, had come back to him with the enchantment of distance and the pathos of homesickness. And of a sudden *Orange Nell* had taken possession of him again, and he had given every leisure hour he could spare to its words and its music.

After Alexandria he had been posted to Gibraltar, and then gone in a ship on an Atlantic patrol, and then been sick and in hospital in Scotland, before coming down to London this morning for a Medical Board to decide his future. He believed he would get his ticket; and if he came out, he would bring with him his cherished ballad opera—near enough to completion now for him to start trying to interest some management in it. "There's only one thing missing," he remarked, "which is rather a nuisance . . . a Prelude that I rather fancied, and which my sister never sent back last month with some other numbers that I'd left with her since before the war. . . . Of course, if I can get an offer, I'll have nobody but you, Gail, to play Nell!"

She smiled at him. "That depends," she had answered. "Though I see you haven't changed, Peter . . . or have you?"

She had been watching him while he talked. He didn't look actually an invalid, though troubled by a dry cough from time to time, and by an evident oppression on his chest. But in his naval uniform he was even thinner than he used to be, and much browned, while his once unruly hair was short-cropped and flat, and even a bit thin in places. There was also a sharp line to his lips which was new and which she rather liked . . . it even thrilled her a little . . . and he had acquired a strange authority and decision of manner. It was only at moments when he was gazing at her that the childlike, chicken-just-out-of-egg look that she knew so well returned to him; and, for no reason that she would have cared to give, she was relieved that it *did* come back . . . at just those moments.

"Tell me all *you've* been up to!" he repeated, leaning forward with his elbows on the table and an alert look in his brown eyes, while he swiftly put a stump of a cigarette to his lips and as swiftly withdrew it again. So she told him . . . what she thought fit, a success story, diversified by such episodes as the blitz in Liverpool and the rueful humours of Ensa touring.

"And now?" he asked, as she ended by saying she had returned to London when the *Girls for Victory!* tour broke up.

"Now," she said, "I've several offers to decide between. But I shall probably go up North again in a week or two with a Raymondy show . . . if they'll give me what I ask."

"I'm glad things have gone so well," he said. "The theatre's pretty well disorganized by the war, isn't it? But we'll see you a leading lady in London again when Peace breaks out, eh?"

"I wouldn't refuse!" she laughed tremulously, and her heart warmed to him. His enthusiasm almost made her believe her own fairy-tales, though (and this was a thing she would not have felt about Peter before) she had a little sensation of fear at what he might say and think if he found her out. . . . But she had had to do it: she couldn't have let him know the truth.

"Look!" he said diffidently, making rings with his cigarette-end in his saucer during the coffee. "I've got some of the *Orange Nell* score with me in my dispatch-case. Would you . . . do you think I could come back with you to your flat and we'd go over some of it together? I do want you to hear it, Gail! It really is what I like best of all I've ever composed. . . . It's sort of come to be my whole life! . . . Well, after what happened to *In Modern Mood* I haven't any confidence in my ability to make the music of to-day. But *Orange Nell* is what I stake my musical future on . . . and it's all for you!"

Gail suddenly blinked, and he saw the wet gleam of tears in her large . . . surely, enlarged . . . eyes.

"Why do you do this to me, Peter, you fool?" she asked, wiping her eyes behind her mirror with the corner of her powder-puff handkerchief. "Of course, you can come and play *Orange Nell* to me; I'm dying to hear it. But please, dear, don't be too optimistic about my playing the part—that may not be in my power."

"I'll call a taxi!" said Peter, signalling for the bill.

VI

When they got out at Gail's flat, Peter looked at the building. "No harm done here!" he remarked, following her upstairs.

"No!" she said, "I've been lucky in *that* . . . and all the rest, of course!" She let them in with her latchkey and went straight across to the drawing-room, with Peter following her.

Old Woolley, who had been sitting with his back propped by one of her great black cushions on the settee, studying *John Bull*, rose at once and stepped forward, offering her a blue paper. Peter could not escape, nor pretend not to hear. He could only pilot Woolley with quiet authority into an adjoining room. Then he returned and sat down beside Gail, who had sunk upon the sofa, hatless, and with her head fallen forward. "Tell me, Gail," he asked, "why did you put on that act—for me?"

She glanced up at him reproachfully. "You should understand," she murmured. "Do you think I wanted you to know what a failure I am?"

"How did it all happen?" he asked.

Gail drew in a sharp breath, hesitated, and then, either from unwillingness to face the pressure which she knew Peter would put upon

her, or from a wish to share her troubles with someone more understanding than Evie, she suddenly began to talk. . . .

In the cold (for both were too absorbed in her story to think of switching on the electric fire) and under the grey light of the sunless autumn afternoon, which drained the colour from the decorations of the room and gave a ghostly tinge to her melancholy face, she talked. Peter could see the tears from time to time gather on her blackened eyelids, tremble and fall in minute crystal drops upon her cheeks; from time to time she stopped to struggle with a sob; and each time it tore his heart across; but he would not let her stop. He must know everything!

Once only he interrupted her. It was when she told him how, in her loneliness after the first night of *Blackpool Breezes*, she had allowed Monty Du Parc to drive her home to her flat on North Shore. "But I heard the car come up!" he exclaimed. "I was there! You didn't know it. I was sitting on a bench by the edge of the cliff, agonizing over you! . . . Oh, my God!"

He rose and walked across to the fire-place. As he stood for a moment with his elbow on the mantel-shelf, he was struggling with a desire that burnt in his breast like a hot coal, the desire to ask her brutally, "And then? . . . You let him go in with you. . . . And then?" But he managed to beat down the savage impulse. Whatever had happened, whatever had not happened, it was Gail's secret. He turned and came back to his seat. "Go on!" he said; and after that made no comment except to put a practical question or two that might help him to understand the tangle of her affairs a little better.

She told him, quite frankly, the whole story of Alex Gilroy; and, though her desolate voice, the same voice that could hold great audiences in thrall in a tragic scene, the same voice used with the same sincerity, went through and through him like a sword, he did not utter a word.

She told him, finally, of Monty's retaliation and her financial ruin. "That's all," she concluded abruptly. "I was silly to try to hide things from you. You were bound to find out, I suppose—if you'd seen a paper this morning even! But I sort of hoped I could disappear into a small show up North or somewhere, and you'd perhaps forget the wash-out you'd wasted so much mistaken faith on."

Peter was silent and still for a second. Then, "Where's the wash-out?" he asked. "Where's the failure, Gail?"

She looked at him with a rueful smile. "I suppose you meant that kindly," she said.

"I meant," he answered, looking steadily into her eyes, "to tell the truth as I saw it. When did you give a bad show? . . . When did you ever play down to an audience? . . . You've told me the story of a woman who wouldn't sell herself . . . for anything, who . . . who . . . held nothing of herself back from," his voice shook, "from the

man she loved. Where's the failure, Gail? It's not been yours, at any rate. In the life I've just come out of, we learnt to judge fellows by what they were in themselves, not by their stripes or stars, or by the decorations they'd got and hadn't earned very likely!"

She turned her head away from him. "You're too good, Peter, that's what's wrong with you."

"I'm rather tired of hearing you say that . . . it's such a beastly word, 'good'! But I don't suppose I can change now. Still, I wonder, Gail if you haven't perhaps had enough of the 'bad' men? They haven't helped you much, have they?"

"It wasn't their trade, was it, Peter? But it looks as if there was something silly in me that can't resist them."

"Yes, something d——d silly, if you ask me!"

"Peter! . . . I didn't expect to be agreed with . . . quite so promptly!"

"Sorry! But I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it, for this once. What you've done doesn't spell failure, but it should show you the red light. These chaps have been cheating you of your life and destroying your chances as an artist. And I've had to stand by, and never been allowed to help you to fulfil yourself! Yet to do that was what God sent me into the world for."

He paused as if expecting her to interrupt. But she merely sat staring at him out of her enormous eyes.

"I haven't done it, I know," he resumed. "And it doesn't look as if I ever would now, does it? Life, I find, is twisted that way. What was planned and meant goes askew: it doesn't alter the fact that it *was* meant. Have I a musical gift—still? It was given me to be used through you. . . . I'm—I'm in a foul temper at this minute, Gail, because I want to take you and shake you and make you play your part in the Big Show . . . Life! I want to force you to bring out all the things that are in you. But I can't do it that way! I could only do it, if you'd realize things . . . and play ball!"

She was still staring intently into his face. "Could it be true?" she whispered.

"How can you tell if you won't try? . . . Gail, will you marry me?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because you're—you're a gold-digger! D—n you, Peter; you keep doing this to me!" She was flooded with tears. "Don't you see," she said, when she had recovered a little control, "I can't come to you now . . . and put all this on your plate?"

"If you married me I should have the right——"

"That's why I won't marry you, Peter!"

"Bit tough on me, isn't it?"

"How can you talk like that, Peter darling?"

"Because I happen to love you—more than somewhat! . . . Anyhow, what are you going to do about it, playing off your own bat?"

"My lawyers say, file a petition in bankruptcy."

"You can't do that! It would be madness, Gail!"

"Why not? Plenty of big people have. What *can* I do?"

"Anyhow, not that! You're not big enough! An important manager, an actress with a great name, if they're forced into bankruptcy, can repay in time, and they usually do. It amounts to an advertisement for them! But what chance have you of ever clearing your name by repaying if you're stripped of everything now? That bad slip-up of yours when you stayed away from the show would be forgotten in time by the managers. But pile bankruptcy on it and you're finished!"

"So, I'm finished! You can do nothing about it, Peter."

"I can at least see your lawyers, if you'll tell me their address, and find out how things really stand. You can't follow the first word of any business or legal matter, you know you can't. Come! Any old friend would be allowed to help in that way!"

VII

The room at All-Star House seemed oddly unchanged to Peter. There were the harlequin in the green and yellow lozenges, the ballerina surrounded by Beardsley-faced swans, the green-leather arm-chairs, and through the window, in wire lettering from which the electric bulbs had been stripped, he could still read on the wall opposite the legend PINK STAR WHISKY CURES YOUR BLUES. There was Zharkov sunk moodily in one of the arm-chairs opposite to him, covering his waistcoat as of old with cigar-ash; and there behind the great desk with the glass screens sat Monty, more important and less debonair than formerly in his directorial uniform of black jacket and pin-stripe trousers, and with a glint of fresh gold dentures when he smiled, but polishing his horn-rims with his familiar movement.

"Well, Peter," he said, "we've considered your proposition that you should make an out-and-out sale of your operetta *Orange Nell* to us. I understand yesterday that you wanted five thousand pounds for it—it's a very big price."

"Not, I think, when you consider all you stand to make out of it. It's the best thing I've done; I'm confident of its success; I wouldn't sell it you out-and-out for twice that figure . . . if I hadn't a very special reason," Peter answered calmly, but with tension in his voice.

Monty, who had put on the horn-rimmed spectacles while he spoke, eyed him malevolently through them for a moment at his last words.

"You see, Peter," he then remarked, "when you speak of its proving a money-spinner, that's where our risk comes in, doesn't it?"

"I should think you two didn't know your business if you failed to get back what I ask you many times over."

"We-ell," said Monty delicately, "that remains to be seen. As a name, you know, Peter, you've rather dropped out."

"I've been away doing a war job."

"We quite understand that; wish to God my health had let me go! But, to come back, your last work played in London wasn't too successful . . . I don't say that was *your* fault!" Spite gleamed through his glasses.

"I'm not interested, Monty, in your theories as to why *In Modern Mood* failed to ring the bell!"

"Yes, Monty!" growled Zharkov. "Com' to the point!"

Monty seemed rather taken aback. He shifted his glasses; felt with his fingers for non-existent papers on his big, bare desk; then said, "It comes to this. We think there's something in your piece. Zharkov rather likes the music—don't you, Grigori?"

"It has its moments," conceded Zharkov.

"Thank you," said Peter, with a hard polish to his tone.

"And so," Monty continued, "we're disposed to make you an offer, Warner. It's for all rights, you'll understand, American as well as British."

"I expected as much."

"Including gramophone recordings."

"You demand them, too?" Peter's voice rose a little.

"Oh, there's no demand!" retorted Monty sharply. "We're not forcing you to sell to us. You came to me and said you wanted a large sum of money at once . . . for a special purpose. If you don't like our terms, you're free to go elsewhere!"

"Vait! Vait!" Zharkov stirred in a dissatisfied way in his chair. "You understand, Warner, we would like to buy your *operette* . . . but we must safeguard ourselves. To make it worth our while to pay this big money we must have all rights, absolutely *all*!"

"And for them," said Monty, "we'll give you four thousand pounds cash."

Peter stood up. "I'm not interested," he said. "Five thousand's my figure!"

"I should have thought you could have beaten the creditors down a little lower than that," sneered Monty.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Peter, with a look in his war-hardened eyes before which Monty's dropped.

"Sit down, please, Warner!" urged Zharkov. "We are old friends! Don't let's misunderstand one another! You don't think four thousand pounds a fair figure?"

"I'm selling for five thousand, not a penny less!"

"Have a whisky, Peter!" said Monty, quite in his old honeyed manner. He went to the cupboard and unlocked it. "I've a drop of pre-war here."

Peter submitted to the ceremony of drinks round. Then Monty resumed. "You must know, Peter, I want to do the best I can for an old pal. If we pay five thousand . . . that is, if Grigori is willing we should pay all that . . . there's something that has to be quite clear. We don't think, Grigori and I, that *Orange Nell* has the ghost of a chance in its present form. It's—well—if you'll forgive me—it's altogether too pre-war. People have been getting more sophisticated since then, and at a hot pace, too! Before we do your opera the book will have to be re-written."

"Re-written!" exclaimed Peter.

"Oh, definitely! Nell Gwynn, yes; but translated into modern language! That might be very amusing . . . anyway, our audiences would expect it."

"But can't you see, man, you'd be spoiling it? My music can't be fitted to some wise-cracking modern libretto!"

"Your music needs revision, also!" said Zharkov.

There was silence in the room, while Peter sat staring at his clasped hands. Then he looked up with his face drawn into deep lines. "Let's have it!" he said. "What are you getting at?"

"Simply this," replied Monty, "and let there be no mistake about it! If we buy this opera, it becomes our property to do exactly as we choose with it. We acquire the right to alter and cut your music as well as your book exactly as seems best to us. And it will be for us to decide whether enough of your original work is left to justify your name appearing on the programme."

Peter sprang to his feet again, clenching and unclenching his fingers. "So you take my name as well, do you?" he almost shouted. "Then what's left for me? My God!"

The other two sat in taut silence observing his emotion. He turned his back on them and walked to the window. . . . PINK STAR WHISKY CURES YOUR BLUES the skeleton lettering grinned at him.

He drew his handkerchief from his sleeve and passed it over his wet forehead. One by one he saw his castles in the sand crumbling and disappearing in the black waves of business rapacity. . . . How could the artist, the creator, ever fight these men? They had lowered Gail's proud and lovely head; now they had him by the throat! . . . But, no, at least he was saving Gail from the abyss by surrendering his work, his hopes of success, his very name! The tide of sacrificial devotion swelled up in his heart: he judged she was well worth it.

Behind his back he heard glasses clinking. "Have another whisky, Peter!" said Monty's voice silkily. Peter turned from the window and came up to the desk. Zharkov watched him with curiosity. Somewhere inside the gross creature there stirred a touch of artistic sensi-

bility. The face of this man they were nailing to the cross of his love reminded him of a great singer he had seen playing a martyr in some opera—he could not remember what it was or where; and in a moment his interest had faded.

“Are you ready,” asked Peter of Monty, “to write me a cheque for five thousand pounds?”

“If you sign now—yes.”

“Have you the contract ready?”

Monty opened a drawer in the desk. “Here!” he said. “I’ve only to fill in the figure. . . . Is it a deal? If so, I’ll call in the secretary to witness, and we needn’t let the grass grow.”

“Just a minute!” pleaded Peter. “If I let the piece go for this, will you undertake . . . will you at least consider giving the part of Nell to Gail Darien?”

Monty looked at him stonily. “That’s where you sign!” was all he said, indicating the place in the contract.

As they bent over the document a screech came up through the dim November sunshine from Piccadilly Circus, and the whole chorus of sirens filled the air with lamentation. They completed the signing hurriedly, although no hostile aircraft approached, for a raid warning always reduced Zharkov to jelly.

VIII

The *maestro’s* spirits, however, were fully restored when, after the best possible war-time lunch at the Turin, a liqueur, a couple of cigars, and the signing of a few letters (all to his advantage) at All-Star House, he returned home, with his thoughts running exultantly on the morning’s deal. At last, he was sure of it, he would be able to take an unassailable place among the composers of his time, for he did know enough of music to realize that *Orange Nell* was likely to pass into the catalogue of light operatic classics. Well; he had worked hard enough to win this place! So many disappointments, so much unfair criticism, so much spent, hitherto without really satisfactory results, in building himself up as a leading musician of his age! Nobody, surely, could say he had not earned this break at last? . . . And he would take Beryl out to dinner to celebrate . . . at the Column, now under Czech management every menu said, but anyway, one of the few restaurants where (if you were a regular visitor) you could get the semblance of a decent meal to-day.

He let himself into the flat and opened the door of the lounge. The lights were on, the black-out drawn, but Beryl was not there. He went out into the hall and called, “Beryl! Beryl!” Then he saw a crack of light through the bedroom door, which stood on the jar. He crossed and opened it; then stood staring on the threshold.

The room was in a wild confusion, drawers pulled out, the built-in wardrobe gaping, several jewel-cases heaped on the dressing-table, a pile of expensive evening gowns laid across a chair in the corner. And in the middle of it, finishing the packing of a small suit-case by fitting in some shabby-looking books from a row tumbled upon the purple silk counterpane with the golden-rayed sun in its centre, was Beryl—Beryl unaccountably dressed in the worn coat and skirt in which she had come to his flat.

"Beryl!" he exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing? Are you going somewhere?"

She looked up sharply, for she had not heard his entry, and he stared amazed at an unfamiliar face, dead-white, with the eyebrows making black bars upon it, and the mouth drawn into an ugly, straight line. "Oh, it's you!" she said. "Go into the lounge, Grigori, and I'll come to you! I've something to say before I go."

"Go?" he asked. "Go where? . . . Go when?"

"Do please go into the lounge! I'll be with you in a minute!"

Zharkov shrugged his heavy shoulders and walked back into the big front room. There he noticed something that gave him another shock. Beryl's harp was covered up in baize, carefully corded—and labelled! What the devil did it all mean? He was advancing to read the address on the label when he heard the door close behind him, and there was Beryl, in the plain old coat and skirt, just putting the suit-case down beside her chair. He goggled at her, finding no words.

"Sit down, Grigori!" she said. "This will take a little time to sort out."

"What do you mean, Beryl?" he gasped as he obeyed. "I don't understand a thing! Please explain!"

"I will." She bent forward, fixing her brown eyes on him with a piercing look. "Grigori, ever since you first played me that piece you brought home . . . oh! weeks ago . . . that piece called 'Soliloquy' . . . I've been worried."

"But why, my dear girl?"

"Because, though you said you had composed it, I *knew* I had heard it before. Then I had a letter from Peter, from somewhere up in Scotland, asking me to send him at once, if I could, all the music I had of his *Orange Nell*. I did, and he answered there was one piece missing, the 'Prelude.'"

"You never told me he had written!"

"No. I had an instinct, Grigori! Well, anyhow, as soon as Peter used that word 'Prelude' a window seemed to open with a click in my memory. I saw myself playing that 'Prelude,' heard you ringing at the door in the Mews, and then questioning me about it. . . . You asked if it was Haydn . . . and I laughed at you, though I was delighted. And, while I was seeing these pictures in my mind, the theme of the 'Prelude' came flowing back to me. . . . I felt I could play

almost the whole thing from memory . . . and then I asked myself why I should all of a sudden remember it so exactly. . . . And the answer came . . . I thought it would kill me, Grigori." Her voice was strangled in a dry sob that seemed to tear her open; for some moments she could not regain any voice to speak.

"I get you to drink!" said Grigori, trying to rise from his chair and make a diversion; but she motioned him back with a furious gesture of her handkerchief, and he sank down upon the cushions again.

"The answer was, Grigori," she said at length in a voice as hoarse as if she had a sore throat, "the answer was that your 'Soliloquy' is my brother's 'Prelude' . . . a little changed, I dare say . . . probably, yes, you would change it a little . . . but it is *his* piece!"

"You are mad!" roared Zharkov suddenly. "I—I don't take zis from you, Beryl! . . . 'Soliloquy' is my own composition!"

"Then where is the music of Peter's 'Prelude'? It has disappeared! . . . Grigori, you took it, I don't know when or how!"

"It is a lie! I don't need to steal from any man, not from your brother, anyway!"

"Don't go on contradicting, Grigori! I have the proof!"

"You have not!"

"I have. When you came in last night and told me Peter was in London . . . he never let *me* know he was coming; I suppose it was to be expected," she interjected drearily. "Well, when you said he had seen Monty yesterday afternoon about selling you something, and you were going to meet him to-day, I felt I just couldn't stand things any longer. I must get at the truth! As soon as you had left this morning, I got on to Doherty at his rooms——"

"Doherty! You had no right to!"

"I couldn't care less! I meant to know! I got him round here . . . said you had left a message I was to give him . . . and when the little leprechaun arrived I turned the whisky on him."

"Aren't you ashamed, Beryl?"

"Not a bit! Whisky would make Doherty put his neck in a noose! I pretended to be fascinated with 'Soliloquy,' asked him if he knew when you had composed it . . . when had he first seen it . . . had you just played the theme to him on the piano . . . or brought him a rough score . . . or given it him all complete, just to copy. . . . It was all so exciting to me, I told him!"

"If I had known you would go behind my back to Doherty——"

"Don't keep interrupting, *please*, Grigori, listen! With whisky and blarney . . . ugh! . . . I got Doherty to remember that you had brought him a complete piano score. Was it in your own hand? I asked him. Then he began to get suspicious, and a nasty look came into those bulging gooseberry eyes of his. 'And why would you be askin' me these questions, ma'am?' he answered. 'Sure, I'd not be rememberin' what the score looked like. . . . Himself often dictates to

this or that person before he brings his work to me for a last, fair copy. . . . Give me the whisky bottle, if you'll be so good!' You can be sure I did, and I brought out a piece of Peter's musical script I happened to have. 'Was it in that hand?' I asked Doherty. He looked at it for a long while, moving his shifty eyes from the paper to me and then to the bottle, which I took away from him and locked up. 'I wish you could remember, Mr Doherty,' I said. 'It would be worth ten pounds to you!' 'Well, then, it was not!' he said. 'Tell me the truth!' I told him, 'if you want the money!' 'Give me a dhrink,' he pleaded, 'I'm starvin' for't!' He was all shaking and his face twisting: I knew I had him where I wanted him then! 'The truth!' I said, 'and I'll bring the bottle back . . . and there is a lot of whisky, Mr Doherty, in ten pounds!' "

"You devil!" spluttered Zharkov, his fleshy lips moist with little bubbles. "Vhat a man in such a state says, who vill believe?"

Beryl looked at Zharkov coldly and distastefully. "Then why are you in this state?" she demanded. "You're looking just like Doherty did, do you know? . . . Anyhow, he lost any control he had left, and began to shout: 'What would I be carin' if it was your brother's music?' he screamed. 'If he's a mu-mu-sician, so'm I, amn't I? Yes, and I could do greater things than he ever dreamed! Tell me why he should have all the luck, just because he can resist the d——d drop? To hell with him! And you can prove nothing, anyway! So give me the ten pounds you've been afther promisin' me, ma'am, an' let me go! I'll deny everything if you tell himself I gave him away. And he'll not sack me for't either, the way I know too much and he can't do without me!' So I paid him, and pushed him out. . . . Oh, God!"—she leant back wearily in her chair—"that you should bring me to this, Grigori!"

Zharkov, while she finished her story in a high, nervous voice, had regained control of himself. He had brought out a cigar, clipped it, and was now smoking tranquilly.

"My dear Beryl," he said, when she stopped, trembling and biting her handkerchief to keep back her tearless sobs, "you have treated me very badly, and I don't think I can ever forgive you! That *you* should believe these things of me! . . . Of course, it is all very easy to explain. I have a mass of papers here and in my office. Among them you vill find compositions of my own, notes and first ideas for compositions . . . some in my own hand . . . some dictated to Doherty or to Radziwill, the leader of my orchestra . . . or to others who help me. Also there are many, many pieces by other composers which are sent me to ask if they are any use to me, and vill I perhaps buy them. Sometimes I see in them ideas that could be used, that could be improved by a real musician, and if so I buy them at a fair price . . . and what is wicked in that? I become collaborateur, or even the real composer by the time I have done with them. Now I vill tell you

what has happened over 'Soliloquy'! Somehow, I don't know how, a piece of your brother's music has got into one of my drawers. . . . You are careless over papers, Beryl: there was all the confusion of the move here . . . and that is what has happened. I look one day through my pigeon-holes, I find this piece that I like, that I believe is my own, that I think I can improve; so I take it to Doherty, and out of it we . . . I . . . make 'Soliloquy' . . . I am very sorry for the mistake, Beryl!"

She lay back in the chair, palely regarding him. "I wish I could believe you," she said at length. "I might keep some rag of my pride!"

"But why should you not believe me, Beryl? When have I ever deceived you?"

She leaned forward abruptly, clenching her fingers on the arms of her chair. "There is one way you could make it easier for me to believe you, Grigori! 'Soliloquy' is not published yet, is it? What you showed me was an advance copy, wasn't it? You said you would hold up the publication till you could bring it out at one of your concerts—which you haven't yet arranged. So there's still time to withdraw it! Write to the publishers at once, doing that . . . and perhaps . . . I can't say . . . but I'd try——"

He shook his head, smiling. "There is no need, Beryl! I have explained all this to you, because I do not wish that you think me a thief! But in any case I am not a thief, because *Orange Nell* . . . all of it . . . this 'Prelude' too, if you are right . . . is mine! Monty and I, we bought the complete work from your brother this morning."

"You didn't!"

"We did, my dear! Peter told us he wanted a very large sum of money, urgently, at once; so he parted with all his rights in *Orange Nell* for a fixed sum . . . and a very generous one! Perhaps you know what he wants all that money for?" He grinned maliciously.

"But he shouldn't! Sell all rights like that—it's madness! *Orange Nell* was his life!"

"It is business!"

"And in any case, Grigori, what has the sale to do with it? He may sell you the performing rights; he doesn't empower you to call the music your own!"

"You don't understand! We have acquired the right to alter and improve, to cut out, to put in, to do what we like with the whole work. . . . Later on we see if it is fair to leave his name on the programme. . . . Don't look like that, my dear! We have paid your brother a great deal of money which we may lose. If we take such a risk, we must be compensated. We are not philanthropists . . . we are not a charitable institution! . . . It is done every day, Beryl! . . . It is business!"

"*Your* business, perhaps!" She had risen from the chair and stood

rigidly over him. "It was not enough, wasn't it, to steal one piece of his music? You must trick him out of his whole future, must you? How do you think he can ever recover from this? But you don't want him to, do you? You won't be satisfied until you have suppressed him completely! I'm going to him now . . . or as soon as I can find him . . . to try to comfort him . . . poor Peter! . . . and to tell him I shall never recover either . . . never recover from the shame of having belonged to a heel like you!"

She stooped and swiftly picked up the little suit-case. "I'm taking nothing," she said, "except what I brought with me here, so you needn't bother to look round after I've gone! My dresses are in the bedroom; your presents are on the dressing-table. My harps I shall send the music-shop people to bring away. I've nothing more to say to you." She walked towards the door; then stopped and turned round. "I forgot," she added. "That bribe I gave Doherty—I count that as *your* money now. So," she pulled off the only ring she had on her fingers, an antique intaglio, "you can have this that Father gave me. At present prices I've no doubt it's worth ten pounds!" and she tossed it towards him over the carpet.

Zharkov bent to field it before it rolled under the book-case. As he did so he heard the front door slam, and stood up, listening. There was not another sound; but he remained where he was for quite a time, alternately staring at the open door through which she had passed and at the ring on the palm of his hand—which was not worth ten pounds!

EVERYBODY FOR THE FINALE, PLEASE!

I

"WELL! here we are again!" said Peter Warner, slowing the little car to a stop as, between the clumps of trees that clothe the gently rolling pale-green flats from Preston to the sea, there leapt into the air like a fountain the Tower. "How often I've wondered," he said, "in the past five years if I'd ever see Blackpool in peace-time again!" He sat looking at "t'Tower," silent and distant beneath a tumultuous grey sky.

"Have we," enquired Gail delicately, "stopped because you wanted to, Pete? Or has the car——?"

"No! It's still ready to go!" Peter reassured her. "It'll make the last lap all right!"

"We 'ope!" replied Gail, and they both laughed as he noisily changed gears and set the shabby little car going again. On the bent luggage carrier behind, a theatrical basket, strapped on with several suit-cases, proclaimed the strolling players.

"You know, darling," said Peter as they jerked along, "I'm almost afraid to arrive at Jack Kelham's in this! . . . 'Member how we used to pull his leg about that old car of his?"

"You may think yourself lucky to have a car at all, with a luxury wife like me to keep!" answered Gail.

"I like that!" murmured Peter. "As if you didn't——"

"Want a sandwich? Shall I pop it into your mouth? . . . Don't kiss my fingers, you soppy date, they're greasy! We're lucky, too, to have got in at old Jack's place. They hadn't a room to let last week, and they're full up now till the end of the season. Most popular professional boarding-house in all Blackpool!"

"That's Nita's cooking," declared Peter. "She's a jewel!"

"I think people enjoy having Jack around the place, too," said Gail. "Better than most of the shows they pay to see! But he's starting off again next week on a long tour, he wrote me."

"My dear girl, don't you know he's been starting off again next week for the last two years? . . . Long may he believe it, poor old lad! . . . But he's far better off as he is. Console yourself with that, darling!"

"D'you mind if we pull off the road somewhere here and stop for a bit?" asked Peter presently. "I can't give proper attention to sandwiches while I'm driving, and as for manipulating the thermos . . ."

They turned off and stopped in a lane running up to a white farm on a knoll between green puff-balls of trees. It seemed really sabbatical

up there, while behind them the gathering traffic of a Sunday morning in June swept along the main-road towards Blackpool, beckoned by its giant pointer.

"Let's have another look at those notices of the Parthenope!" said Peter, after a while, holding out a hand while with the other he lifted the cup of the thermos flask to his lips.

"Oh, I should forget them!" said Gail, hastily trying to remove the Sunday papers from his grasp.

"Why? They don't worry me, Gail! I knew it had to happen some time. I'm only surprised they waited so long before producing it, right to the end of the war in Europe! . . . But they were wise. If they'd brought it out during the rocket period, there'd not have been much hope for *Orange Nell*."

"They've no right to call it *Orange Nell*!" declared Gail vehemently. "It makes me mad to read about it!"

Peter smiled a trifle wryly. "Well, they certainly do seem to have turned it inside out, the poor old thing! Fancy laying half the scene in New York, with Nell Gwynn's great-great-great-granddaughter or whatever she would be——"

"Fancy announcing it as 'By M. du Parc, with music by Grigori Zharkov,'" raged Gail.

"Fancy!" said Peter with a deep sigh, "engaging Bobo for leading lady! Bobo as my *Orange Nell*! . . . Oh, well, she seems to have done it at last! Paeans in all the papers! It'll save Fizz! They were almost broke with the doodle-bugs and the rockets!"

"Peter," said Gail, turning to him with tears in her eyes and a tremble in her voice. "You do know . . . you do believe . . . I'd never have let you do it for me . . . if I'd known, if only I'd known in time to stop you!"

"Just what I took care you shouldn't!" Peter drew her to him. "And oh, darling, how much worth while . . . how thoroughly worth while it's been——"

"Even if I'm not a leading lady any longer?"

"That depends on how you look at it!"

"And you're not disappointed with me because you don't see my name in lights?"

"The light I care about shines through you all right!"

Two not particularly well-dressed touring variety artists, in an almost ramshackle car, within three hundred yards of the trippers' rush to Blackpool's first peace-time summer season, clinging together in a kiss that seemed as if it could not be dissolved—is that romance?

II

"Still, what makes me mad!" resumed Gail at last obstinately, as they threw bits of greased paper into the ditch, and passed a damp

towel from one to the other to freshen up before taking the road again, "what makes me mad," she repeated, shaking *eau-de-Cologne* over her palms and her handkerchief, "is to think of those two rat-bags chuckling over their cleverness and reckoning up their profits in advance! What a gloating-party there'll be in All-Star House to-morrow morning! I can see it all! Can't you?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. Indeed, he could see Monty's room with the harlequin and the Beardsley swans and the whisky advertisement outside the window and the great, polished, empty desk. He could hear Monty's voice . . .

"I don't know what it means? Do you, Grigori?"

"Pay vithin twenty-four hours!" Zharkov is frowning over a letter headed Goldsack Investments, Ltd. "But they can't do zis, Monty?"

"Well," Monty wipes his glasses with a furrowed forehead, "the deed says 'pay on demand.'"

"But they never do demand . . . not vithout warning, like this! . . . The interest has been paid regularly, hasn't it, Monty?"

"Of course it has! You could trust me to attend to that. I've been run off my feet . . . like you . . . these past weeks getting the show on, but I wouldn't let a thing like this slip. Too dangerous! I checked up on it before you came in; we have their receipt for the last half-year's interest."

"Vell, then?" Zharkov spread his hands. "What can they do?"

"I don't know. But it says, 'Pay on demand,' Grigori! . . . Come in!" An almost timid knock has fallen on his door. "Oh God! Not just now!" he groans.

Peeping round the door is a yellow face with a bald cranium above it, and two small black eyes darting from side to side of the room.

"Come in, Zaleski!" says Monty resignedly. "The Board doesn't meet till this afternoon, you know . . . and we've a lot of things to clear up, so as to be ready for it. . . . Seen this morning's papers? They're as enthusiastic as the Sunday ones, and the Libraries are bombarding us!"

Zaleski, turning his stained yellow hat over and over in his doleful fingers, advances to Monty's table. He smiles, and Monty turns his head aside, on the pretext of opening a drawer. Through dental neglect during the war years Mr Zaleski's mouth has too much the aspect of a bomb-damaged area to be tonic . . . particularly at such a moment. "Have a cigar?" asks Monty.

Zaleski grabs it, opens his coat, puts it in his tartan vest-pocket, and ejaculates, "Goldsack Imfeshments, Ltd.!"

"Goldsack?" asks Monty sharply. "Do you know anything about those sharks?"

"Vat vos sharksh?" Mr Zaleski is understood to enquire.

"Sharks? . . . Oh, nothing! Fish!" answers Monty irritately.

"It's just a figure of speech!"

"Figure? . . . 'Ow moch?" mumbles Zaleski.

"No figure at all—of that kind! It just means—well—rapacious!"

"Anodder fish?"

"Oh, my God!" Monty rests his forehead on his hand. "Look, Zaleski! We are very occupied just now, on private business!"

Zaleski shakes his head and his finger. "No private pishness! Goldsack!"

"What are you getting at? What's Goldsack to do with you?"

Zaleski makes a gesture to smite his chest, remembers in time, opens his jacket, and removes the cigar to a place of safety. Then, striking his tartan bosom, "Goldsack! *Me!*" he ejaculates.

Zharkov jumps to his feet cursing; Monty grabs the edge of his desk, and his horn-rims fall on the spotless blotter with a little tap. "You!" he says hoarsely. "Goldsack Investments . . . it's *you* all the time? . . . Why didn't I guess?"

Mr Zaleski holds out his hand, cupped like a beggar's. "Pay on demant!" he says.

Monty pushes his chair back in horror. "Don't be absurd, Zaleski!" he titters. "Expect me to put sixty thousand pounds into your palm just like that? . . . Besides, you've taken us by surprise! We must have time to consider our position! It will be weeks before we cover our expenses on *Orange Nell!* You know that as well as I do!"

"Pay on demant!" repeats Zaleski.

"My *tear* Zaleski!" implores Zharkov, the sweat running out of his thick hair down his face. "We must have a little time! . . . Sixty thousand pounds!"

"On demant!"

Zharkov repeats his appeal in Russian, Polish, Yiddish, German, and then in a blend of all four intermingled with words one would not translate if one could. The only result is a contortion of Zaleski's facial muscles such as might be caused by sudden colic.

Then with an unparalleled, a portentous distinctness, these words drop into the anguished silence of the room, under the grin of the harlequin, the enigmatic smile of the Swan Princess. "You . . . cannot pay! . . . I . . . take all! . . . Fizz . . . Parthenoli . . . *Orange Smell* . . . all mein!"

"My *tear*, *tear* Zaleski!" moans Zharkov, his face as well as his voice running with tears. "You can't vant to run all the London theatre yourself?"

"What the hell?" demands Monty, ashy white, without his glasses, and with his hair actually ruffled; "what the hell do you think *we're* to do?"

"*Scarpier!*" says Zaleski, cracking an imaginary whip: he had once run a travelling circus in Turkey.

"Yes," continued Peter, "no doubt, you can imagine every word they'll be saying on Monday morning at All-Star House! What a mutual scratching of backs! What an orgy of self-congratulation! But since we shan't be there to hear it, my sweet, why worry?"

III

A couple of hours later, after leaving their things and garaging the car at "O-ME-KNOT"—Nita Kelham's exotically named boarding-house—the two of them, escaped from Jack's wise-cracks and the strains of the "portable," were strolling by the sea, thinking vaguely of tea. Under the familiar bursts of pale sunshine the front, with its dark, eddying crowds, exhibited its unchanging aspect. There was an absence of carnival fripperies, no doubt, and a more sedate pursuit of enjoyment; there were queues lengthening outside each restaurant and tea-shop; the uniforms of a year ago had dwindled to rare specks; but fundamentally there was no change in the rhythm of Blackpool's enjoyment. A tall man with a hat crushed over his eyes, who was driving a small car, stopped by the kerb to speak to a friend, and Peter nudged Gail.

"There's Joe Tucker!" he said. "Another completely contented man! He knows that people will always pay two bob to see him on any Blackpool pier!"

"Why," asked Gail, "did you say *another* contented man? Where's the first?"

"Me, of course! Slow—Gail!"

She slipped her arm through his. "Sure of that? Honestly, honestly sure?"

"Cut my throat! . . . Why should I be anything else?"

"Well, I've sometimes thought that, as you never write those lovely songs you used to nowadays, perhaps you——"

He shook his head. "No," he said; "it doesn't mean that. It's just that I feel finished with that world. I couldn't start in again with Melodeon, with Fizz, with Raymondy . . . they've sort of killed that part of me between them. . . . The day they rejected *you*, Gail, they killed that dream in me. But you know I go on writing music . . . even though there mayn't be much money in 'Austin Jesson',"—which was the name under which Peter Warner now composed *concertos* and *suites* aimed at the Chamber Music public—with the possibility of the Albert Hall one day in front of him.

There was not, as he said, much money in it, though there was the reward of critical approval in *The Times* and the best weeklies. But with his disablement pension, and some reading for a music publisher of a very different order from his Tin Pan Alley friends, and what he earned on tour, Peter held up his end of his partnership with Gail:

he worked, and she sang, giving her self for those who had ears to hear her; and at the moment Peter could not see much farther. "I wish," he said irrelevantly, "I could have made it up with old Wally Montrose before he passed over. I hope he forgives me now!"

They passed the Clifton and the North Pier. . . . There, Peter recalled, Beryl had met them with Derek on the day they arrived to start rehearsing *Blackpool Breezes*. She was harpist in the Duke's Theatre orchestra now, back at the old job; and, though it was a duty to call and see her from time to time, the savage bitterness of her tongue made it an unpleasant experience. . . . How sorry he was for Beryl!

Three sleek black dachshunds, with bright eyes alert, came running towards him along the front. "Good Lord!" he said, stooping to pet them, "it could be . . . yes, it *is*!"

Zorilda was crying out and shaking hands with them, her face crinkled up into a thousand laughs, her coppery curls fluttering in the breeze as they tore their way from under a smart cap adorned with small gold pompons. "So you're married, eh? You should be ashamed, Gail, to take him from me! The most perjured man! . . . He asked me to name the day, any Tuesday or Wembley, he said!"

"And what about Victor, Zoe?" demanded Peter.

"Och, I'm thinking I'll have to be marryin' the lad one day! How else will I stop him following me about? If it weren't that Mamma weeps and throws flat-irons whenever I speak of it! Still, I think I'll do it to spite the old . . . *darling*! D'you admire my cap, Peter?" She shook the pompons in his face. "I made it myself this morning, you ken, in our lodgings. There were far too many bobbles on the window-curtains anyway!"

Peter winked. He could have made a good guess at what the saucy little confection must have cost at some Manchester milliner's.

"Good-bye! God bless!" cried Zoe. "Come and see our show—it stinks!"

Peter chuckled. He applauded Victor's perseverance and his judgment too.

At the corner by the Tower and the Woolworth building, he and Gail turned back to seek the Savoy. As they did so a fine touring-car went past them, masterfully driven, and they caught a glimpse of a scarlet face, crowned with white hair, and a pair of thick glasses over the driving-wheel.

"I didn't know Bob Forshaw was here!" said Gail. "What's he doing?"

"Plenty, you can be sure!" answered her husband. "Here, and at Douglas, and at Colwyn Bay and Llandudno . . . in fact, everywhere! His name doesn't figure on half the programmes he puts on; but I'm told that every week he counts a pile that makes him richer than he ever was. And he's been going in for slot-machines, the profits

of which are simply astronomical! Do you know what Isidore Raymond is reported to have said to Zaleski a little while ago? 'When you and I and José Miramar have syndicated ourselves into Queer Street, that old blighter will still be doing shows all over the country, and d——d good shows too!' And he was right! You see, old Bob's the real man of the theatre!"

IV

On the Monday evening during the second show of Vincent Gynn's continental revue *London to Paris Express* at the Emporium Mr Athelstan Rigglesworth came down from the circle bar, and stood for awhile, pleasantly lit up, chewing his cigar-end at the back of the stalls. He was a far greater national figure now than ever he had been. The War had set him on a new pinnacle. Had he not prophesied everything that was going to happen? Had he not done more than armies, navies, and air-fleets to tumble Hitler and Mussolini off their pedestals by his challenges from the top of his column? Had he not shown Dowding how to defend England, Eisenhower how to invade Europe, and Montgomery how to outwit Rommel? And was he not to-day the rallying-point against Socialism and the Red Peril? Athelstan felt he did the pavement an honour by walking on it this year of grace!

While he stood at the back of the Emporium, on top of the world, but short of two paragraphs for his next "Diary," the tabs parted, showing a draped stage with a piano and a man sitting at it. There was a rattle of applause as a slim girl in a black chiffon dress, with a page-boy bob of blonde hair, came on and bowed. Athelstan stared at her as she began to sing; then his gaze wandered to the man quietly accompanying her, and back again. "Now, where have I seen those people before?" he muttered.

CURTAIN

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